
EXPLORATIONS OF THE PAINTED REAL:

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION IN THE WORK OF FOUR ARTISTS.

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Declaration

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2 March 2011

Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into the relationship between photorealistic painting and specific devices used to aid the artist in mediating the real. The term 'reality' is negotiated and a hybrid theoretical approach to photorealism, including mimesis and semiotics, is suggested. Through careful analysis of Vermeer's suspected use of the *camera obscura*, I argue that camera vision already started in the 17th century, thus signalling the dramatic shift from the classical Cartesian perspective scopic regime to the model of vision offered by the camera long before the advent of photography. I suggest that contemporary photorealist painters do not just merely and objectively copy, but use photographic source material with a sophisticated awareness in response to a rapidly changing world. Through an examination of the way in which the *camera obscura* and photographic camera are used in the works of four artists, I suggest that a symbiotic relationship of subtle tensions between painting and photographic technology emerges. This results in visions of the painted real that may be meaningful to contemporary society and have the ability to emotionally affect the viewer.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die verhouding tussen fotorealistiese skilderkuns en die spesifieke metodes wat die kunstenaar se vertolking van die werklikheid vergemaklik. Die term, 'realiteit' word krities oorweeg te midde van 'n saamgestelde teoretiese aanslag tot fotorealisme wat mimesis en semiotiek insluit. Deur 'n noukeurige analise van Vermeer se oënskynlike gebruik van die *camera obscura*, hou ek voor dat fotografiese sig reeds sedert die 17e eeu teenwoordig is. Hierdie gewaarwording dui op 'n dramatiese skuif vanaf 'n klassieke, Kartesiaanse perspektief en skopiese regime tot die model van visie gebied deur die kamera, lank voor die ontwikkeling van fotografie. Ek stel voor dat kontemporêre fotorealistiese skilders nie bloot objektief kopieër nie, maar fotografiese verwysings met 'n gesofistikeerde bewussyn in reaksie tot 'n vinnig-veranderende wêreld gebruik. Deur 'n ondersoek na die wyse waarop die *camera obscura* en fotografiese kamera in die werke van vier kunstenaars gebruik word, stel ek voor dat 'n simbiotiese verhouding die subtiële spanning tussen skilderkuns en fotografiese tegnologie meemaak. Dit lei tot visionêre weergawes van 'n geskilderde realiteit wat 'n betekenisvolle posisie in die kontemporêre samelewing beklee en die moontlikheid besit om die toeskouer op 'n emosionele vlak te affekteer.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

"At first glance, it appears that nothing could be easier than seeing. We just point our eyes where we want them to go, and gather in whatever there is to see" (Elkins 1996:11). Photorealistic painting appears to offer an effortless and clear picture of physical reality. Nothing could seem easier than to accept such recognisable things as a street scene in Robert Bechtle's painting *Six Houses on Mound Street* (Fig 1) or an empty hospital bed in Adriaan van Zyl's painting *Arrival* (Fig 2) as faithful renditions of the physical world. However, while it may seem effortless for the viewer to accept these paintings as accurate recordings of the way the world looked in a given moment and from a specific position, this illusory veneer masks an incredibly complex and interesting web of relationships to reality.¹

The difficulties related to defining and discussing reality may arise from the idea that there is no accessing or understanding reality except through subjective interpretation, or some form of mediation. Far from being a fixed and neutral concept, philosophers' and academics' understanding of reality is constantly being negotiated. Richard Dryer says "One apprehends reality only through representations of reality, through texts, discourses, images: there is no such thing as direct or unmediated access to reality" (1993:2). Furthermore, in a photorealistic painting the reality of the physical world is mediated through camera, photograph and paint, through the artist's sensibilities and context, and ultimately through the viewer who makes sense of this close but far reality and brings together the contradictory nature of the real and the illusion. Each mediation affects how reality is pictured and interpreted. Additionally, representations not only passively mediate but also actively construct changing notions of what is understood as reality. This leads to the conclusion that a single, fixed and objective notion of reality is problematic.

The perception of what is real socially and technologically has influenced, and continues to influence painting. Contemporary photorealism is only possible because of this. I am interested in how different notions of reality affect the way certain painters picture reality. Furthermore, I am interested in how developments in visual technology since the sixteen hundreds, in particular the invention of the *camera obscura* and the photographic camera, have influenced what realities can be pictured.

¹ Authors often use inverted commas to indicate the problematic and ambiguous nature of the term 'reality'. 'Reality' and 'realism' are no less problematic in my study, however, for cosmetic reasons and because I am devoting a chapter to these terms, I have decided not to use inverted commas.

Changing notions of reality brought about by new technologies and ideas alter the way in which western viewers of today approach images. Barbara Savedoff points out that: "The development of a new medium can change the way we see and use older media, and can thus change our readings of works produced in those older media" (1997:201). For the contemporary viewer who is accustomed to glossy magazine images, moving images and multiple photographs, looking at a Johannes Vermeer painting now must be different to what a Dutch seventeenth century viewer would have experienced. Although paintings and print material may have been common in Dutch seventeenth century homes, in quantity and accessibility they cannot compare to the volumes of images experienced today by the wealthy and affluent, but also by the lower income brackets of western society.

The unprecedented mass proliferation and production of images today urges viewers to reassess the very nature of what is real. It is likely that the proliferation of images western viewers are exposed to on a daily basis changes the way painting is experienced both visually and philosophically. It is for this reason that I believe it is important to address changing ideas of reality in relation to photorealism. Apart from the arguably numbing effect of the current abundance of images in circulation,² the western lay-viewer of today may be thought of as naturally more aware and sceptical of technological mediation. "In a world where manipulation is on the rise, all images encountered in the media, even reproduced photographs, become suspect" (Savedoff 1997:211). As images become easier to manipulate their believability is constantly questioned and the viewer may be conditioned to too readily suspect a photograph of being 'Photoshopped' or a 'You Tube' video of being faked. It is therefore necessary to explore how this context has affected contemporary photorealism and to see if photorealism is a reaction to or a perpetuation of this mass manipulated image industry.

Jonathan Crary believes this proliferation of images is resulting in possibly the most radical shift in what contemporary western society regards as real (1990:1). Furthermore, this shift is drastically reconfiguring the relationship between observers and representation (Crary 1990:1). As technology today advances ever more rapidly so too artists are having to adjust and reaffirm their place within contemporary art practise. Rather than signalling the ever-threatening 'death of painting',³ this re-adjusting of 'scopic-regimes' is a challenge for the contemporary painter and

² The view that current mass exposure of reproduced images has a numbing effect on the viewer is commonly held by Elkins in his books *On Pictures and the Words that Fail them* (1998) and *Pictures and Tears* (2001). In the latter he maintains that: "A picture can be taken in so quickly, and reproductions of it can be so accurate, that it can be impossible *not* to see it again and again over the years. After a while, the effect is numbing" and when repeatedly seeing more popular paintings such as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* he regrets that: "Not only have I forgotten my first encounters with them, which were sometimes intense, but I have almost forgotten that they mean *anything*" (2001:77).

³ Some artists and critics have heralded the supposed 'death of painting'; prominently from the introduction of modern photography around the 1820's because it was thought to have replaced painting in its mimetic and representational function, to the 1960's focus on conceptual installation art and performance art over painting. Dadaists in Zurich around 1911 were known for exclaiming that "art is dead" and similarly, Oscar Wilde is famously known for saying that "All art is completely useless" (in Van der Merwe 2000:n.pag.) in his book *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Although Van der Merwe suspects the 'death of painting' may first have been proclaimed by the eighteenth century German art historian and

observing subject alike, and new technologies, tools and subject matter can form an interesting and relevant symbiotic relationship.

In order to investigate representations such as photorealistic paintings, it is necessary to explore the way reality is mediated and constructed within them. This includes looking at selected theoretical approaches to understanding reality, which is the focus of Chapter Two, looking at the role of technological devices of mediation such as the *camera obscura*, looked at in Chapter Three, and the photographic camera, which forms the subject of the first two parts of Chapter Four. Approaches to understanding the emotive effects of the paintings looked at in this study is looked at in the last section of Chapter Four. Unravelling these connections between photorealism and reality is a difficult task, but it is worth undertaking because it will help the viewer to better understand the role of technological mediation in photorealism, how reality is interpreted in these paintings and why photorealism may still be relevant today.

The concept of reality remains ever-elusive. From Plato and Aristotle, philosophers and theorists have continued to grapple with the notion of reality. This has not led to a refined definition or truth about reality, but rather a plurality of incredibly complex, varied and constantly renegotiated ideas on the subject. For philosophers, these ideas range from Plato believing that authentic reality and truth are abstract notions that do not exist in the world of physical things, but rather in an abstract realm of ideas⁴ to Jean Baudrillard's idea that reality does not exist. "[Baudrillard] argues that we have only ever had simulacra of one sort or another, and that there has never been a true real that is known to us" (Hegarty 2004:9).

Reality is equally contradictory in an art historical context. A depiction of reality for the nineteenth century Social Realist painter involves a rejection of romanticised and idealised subject matter in favour of depicting the social 'realities' of the modern working classes. These paintings need not be illusionistic or depicted in exact naturalistic detail, but rather display reality as common and everyday subject matter, such as peasants and farm workers involved in their daily tasks. Conversely, for certain Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1950's, reality is to be found in the material properties of the surface and brushstrokes of a painting (Nochlin 1971:238-239). On the other hand, Nouveau Réalisme (New Realism), founded by Pierre Restany in 1960, directly appropriates physical reality to create artworks by collaging and assembling contemporary objects such as popular posters (Stremmel 2004:13).

With such diverse and contradictory ideas for the same concept, it may seem unfeasible to discuss reality in a meaningful and directed way. The aims of this study, however, are not to

aesthete Johann Winckelman, he points out that it may not be possible or even useful to pinpoint exactly who made this statement first (2000:n.pag). This is because already "More than 2000 years ago Plato unequivocally condemned the validity of painting" (Van der Merwe 2000:n.pag). Nevertheless, the extent to which the 'death of painting' was a pressing concern for artists seemed to have increased with the advent of mass-producible photography.

⁴ Thus according to Plato, the physical world is comprised of copies and the artist who imitates these things creates objects three times removed from truth and reality and is therefore making deceptive, superficial and imperfect things because it is a move away from the so-called truth. See Janaway (2006:9-11) for an explanation of Plato's ideas on reality.

define reality. Rather, by adopting a pluralistic approach I look at various ways to unpack meaning in the work of a selection of artists that have a particular affinity for representing pictures of reality. Some of these approaches include looking at theories of mimesis and semiotics and a brief overview of some art historical ideas on reality. Although often contradictory, a plurality of views can offer useful perspectives on how the photorealistic painting fits into current ideas of reality. There is no complete translating or full understanding of the wordless effects a painting may have on the viewer, but there are some ways of looking that can illuminate and enrich the experience.

This thesis serves to help me understand both my need-desire to paint in a photorealistic manner and the broader context within which my own paintings are situated. This study also emerged out of an interest in three artists; Dutch seventeenth century painter Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), American Photorealist painter Robert Bechtle (1932-) and the South African painter Adriaan van Zyl (1957-2006). Although it may not be conscious, all three of these artists veil and reveal the technology they have used in their paintings in varying ways. It seems that by doing this, multiple tensions are created in each work. This may facilitate the 'suspension of disbelief' in the viewer and allow for an emotional response whether it is described as an experience of the sublime⁵ (a term commonly associated with these artists' works),⁶ something uncanny (Freud 1919 (2001);1955), a piercing *punctum* (Barthes 1981) or is expressed in tears (Elkins 2001). These emotive effects paintings can have on the viewer are explored in Chapter 4.3. Having been influential in my own work I am interested in how these artists manage to create these emotive effects through their utilisation of photography and manipulation of paint and how this relates to my own painting practise. An exhibition catalogue documenting my practical work completed for this degree is included in Addendum 2 and should be seen as supplementary.

1.2. Aims and objectives

This study comprises an exploration of the way in which reality is negotiated in certain photorealistic paintings and in selected works of Vermeer. As photorealism is so dependent on the photograph I explore various 'devices of mediation'. In particular, the photographic camera and the *camera obscura* are explored, because what I am calling 'camera vision' (the particular type of seeing that photographic and *camera obscura* technology enables)⁷ has not only changed what is possible within painting, but is an important factor in changing the way reality is theorised

⁵ The term 'sublime' may be as problematic as 'reality'. Again my choice for not referring to the term in inverted commas is for cosmetic reasons and because I discuss the term at length in Chapter Four.

⁶ Hosts of critics including Susan Sontag in a review of *A Study of Vermeer* (1994) by Edward Snow (Sontag s.a.:n.pag.) and Imogen Tilden (Tilden 2001:n.pag.) and philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer (in Samuel 2002-10:n.pag.) describe Jan Vermeer's paintings as sublime. Griselda Pollock devotes an entire chapter to Vermeer's sublimity in the book *The Sublime Now* (White & Pajaczkowska 2009). Glen Hefland notes Robert Bechtle's command of darkness in a painting as sublime (2003:n.pag.). Being relatively recent artists, little has been written about the work of Adriaan van Zyl and even less about my own work. In *Sehnsucht in the Art of Adriaan van Zyl* (2009) Stella Viljoen finds Van Zyl's work communicating a "sublime longing through an almost obsessive documentation of material reality" (2009:8).

⁷ Camera vision will be explored further in Chapter Two.

(as discussed by, among others, Roland Barthes (1981); John Berger (1972); Arthur C. Danto in Janaway (2006) and James Elkins (2001)). I investigate the manner in which four artists have used technology to mediate visual reality in their art and explore the effects this may have on both the artist's painting style and the viewer's interpretation of the painting. These artists are specifically chosen as the subject of this research because apart from influencing my own art making, they incorporate a camera mode of picturing reality in their paintings and yet they seem to veil the role technology played in the art making. This creates subtle tensions in their work that seems to contribute to the emotive effects these paintings may have on the viewer.

Simply put, the aims of this study are:

- To investigate the negotiation of the real as a theoretical construct.
- To analyse the manner in which Vermeer negotiated the real with the help of the *camera obscura*.
- To understand the role of contemporary technological mediation in the work of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself.
- To understand how the multiple contradictory states at play in select paintings by all four artists can facilitate emotive response in the viewer.

1.3. Theoretical framework and methodology

As a theoretical framework for this study I have engaged with the ideas of various theorists who have written on the relationship between photography (or technological mediation) and painting, Elkins (1986; 2001; 2007; 2009), Barthes (1981) and Crary (1990) being key among them. I have also made use of semiotic, mimetic, art historical theories on vision and perspective, theories on contemporary photography and mass media and various emotive response theories. These are introduced in the literature review and elaborated on in the body of the text.

This thesis comprises an exploratory and qualitative study. Due to prescribed length, I have had to exclude and limit many relevant areas of study that are relevant to my topic. As concepts of reality and the use of mediating technology in painting are almost infinite fields of study, I have chosen only four artists ranging from the seventeenth century to the present within a western context, whose use of technology and ability to emotively move the viewer I find particularly interesting. Vermeer is chosen as an example of an artist who uses the camera (in this case *camera obscura*) in making his paintings and is so seen as a forerunner to photorealism. Focusing on Vermeer's use of the *camera obscura* assists in understanding the contemporary use of photography in photorealistic painting. Bechtle is relevant because he is seen as one of the pioneer Photorealists, because he is one of the first artists to extensively and intensely use photographs as source material, and because his subject matter relates to Van Zyl's and my own. Similarly, Van Zyl is chosen as a contemporary example of photorealism in South Africa and because his subject matter has relevant similarities to the subject matter in my paintings. In order to allow me to deal in depth with the negotiation of reality and the emotive effects of the

paintings in question, my study will be limited in many respects. Ancient and pre-modern technologies and concepts of reality are not covered and an extensive discussion of relevant contemporary digital technology⁸, including moving pictures, is simply outside the scope of this study. My study concerns a brief introduction to some of the philosophical issues one might raise around the topic of technological mediation in photorealist art in relation to four artists.

This thesis is not an attempt to position photorealism in painting or my painting in a hierarchical priority over other modes of making art and other ways of representing the real. It is rather an exploration of one aspect; the relationship between painting and the use and effects of certain technological mediation in selected paintings. It is not an attempt at an answer, overarching truth or definitive conclusion, but rather at a pluralistic and explorative understanding of this one aspect. This is achieved by adopting multiple theorists' viewpoints to form a hybrid approach to some of my main areas of interest in 'explorations of the painted real'.

1.4. Literature review

This research is divided into three main categories.

- The negotiation of reality in painting and philosophy.
- Technology as a mediating tool used by four artists: Vermeer, Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself.
- Emotive responses to photorealistic paintings.

What follows is a brief overview of these main areas and a review of the relevant literature used for each as preparation for the more in depth approaches in the coming chapters.

The negotiation of reality in painting and philosophy:

Since Plato and Aristotle, the concept of reality has been continuously negotiated. For Dryer

One apprehends reality only through representations of reality, through texts, discourses, images: there is no such thing as direct or unmediated access to reality. But because one can see reality only through representation it does not follow that one does not see reality at all. . . . Reality is always more extensive and complicated than any system of representation can possibly comprehend, and we always sense that this is so - representation never 'gets' reality, which is why human history has produced so many different and changing ways of trying to get it. (Dryer 1993:2).

This suggests that the ways in which reality can be understood through representations are many. It will therefore only be possible to include select theories that address the negotiation of reality.

⁸ Some authors not included in this study who specifically address the effects of contemporary digital technology on western art and observers include Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* 1964; Christine Paul, *Digital Art*, 2008; Bruce Wands, *Art of the Digital Age*, 2007.

Interpretation theories (as will be studied in Chapter Two) are roughly grouped into mimetic or perceptual approaches and semiotic or interpretive approaches. Although this is an artificial divide, for the purposes of this study it serves to clarify some general camps of thought on approaching an understanding of the link between reality and painting. Plato (1989) and Aristotle's (Schwartz 1968) ideas on mimesis form a foundation to theorising reality and are elaborated on by Elias Schwartz (1968) and Göran Sörbom (2002) among others. Modern ideas on the mechanics of vision are outlined by the neuroscientist journalist and researcher, Ashish Ranpura (s.a.) and David Blinder (1986), and are contrasted with Rudolph Arnheim's (1974) earlier (and perhaps less accurate) ideas of how perception works. The point where perception starts to make sense and is interpreted by a viewing subject is notoriously difficult to identify. Richard Wollheim (1987) offers his accounts of viewers 'seeing-in' and an important 'two-foldness' that takes place when paintings are looked at. Kendall Walton (1990) stresses the importance of the imagination; that the viewer necessarily plays games of make believe. Alan Goldman (in Eldridge) offers theories of resemblance necessary to interpreting the perceived reality in photorealistic painting. Also looked at is Tom Grotton's (1986) criticism of reflection theories, and Mary F. Gormally and Pamela Gerrish Nunn's criticisms of the supposed purely perceptual links paintings may have to reality.

Semiotics, as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce is looked at by Peter P. Trifonas (2005), David Crow (2003) and Harris (2001). The latter two, with the addition of Blinder (1986) and more significantly Barthes (1981) and Elkins (1998), offer some criticisms towards a semiotic approach to paintings. One of many methods for understanding an image, structuralist semiotics maintains that language and cultural products are systems of constructed signs; everything has sign value and meaning can be found in the underlying structure inherent in cultural products. For texts, meaning may be brought about by reading objects as signs and relating these signifiers to signifieds. As a predominantly linguistic model of analysis, it may be difficult to translate paintings into sets of semiotic signs, signifiers and signifieds. Structuralism is not an ideal analytical system to apply to every aspect of a painting because defining what a sign in a painting is may not always be possible. Furthermore, post-structuralists maintain that language and signs, and thus their meanings, are culturally conditioned, subject to biases and therefore cannot be fixed, reliable and objective meaning givers. Meaning then cannot just come from observing only an object, but from 'deconstructing' it by looking at the systems of knowledge and contexts used to produce it. Barthes considers photography (and arguably photorealism) to be irreducible to the codes of language "even if, obviously, certain codes do inflict our reading of it" (1981:88). Barthes (in Moriarty 1991) is useful for his ideas on structuralist, post-structuralist and semiotic understandings of reality and Elkins (1991, 1996 and 1998) elaborates on direct experiential reality versus mediating through constructs of language, theories and mass media.⁹

⁹ John Walker describes 'mass media' as denoting "certain modern systems of communication and distribution which 'mediate' between relatively small, specialized groups of cultural producers and very large numbers of cultural consumers" (2001:8-9). It is characterized in part by the use of machines such as cameras, computers and printing presses and generally includes "photography, the cinema, radio,

I look at Elkins' views on the difficulties of looking at pictures and applying western theories to unpack their meaning. Elkins (1998) offers some alternative ideas on semiotics and stresses the difficulties in writing and talking about paintings, believing that this is something not many theorists acknowledge as they seem to too easily interpret images. In *On Pictures and the Words that Fail them* (1998), Elkins seeks to problematise paintings, maintaining that they are not easy to explain and will partly always remain opaque; part of what painting is is stubbornly silent (1998:xi,267). This view is evident when he says:

My central objective has been to show that pictures are much harder to write about than they appear to be when interpretations focus on nameable symbols and stories. It is hard to pay attention to nonsemiotic aspects of pictures, and harder still to remain alert to the temptation to separate meaning from apparent meaninglessness. In simplest terms, it is hard to just look: it is much easier to read, or to tell stories, than to stare at the peculiarities of a stubbornly silent and senselessly wordless object. (1998:267).

With these sentiments in mind, I will be cautious in applying theories too eagerly in attempts to explain and fix meaning to a painting. Instead, I offer a plurality of theorists' ideas as *some* approaches to understanding, keeping in mind that these are all subjective interpretive responses. Although this may only provide a limited cross section of some of the main debates pertaining to the real, rather than providing a survey of all negotiations of reality, which would prove an impossible task, I have highlighted just those that offer interesting standpoints with regards to photorealism.¹⁰

television, video, advertising, newspapers, magazines, comics, paperbacks and recorded music" (Walker 2001:9).

¹⁰ Baudrillard may seem relevant to look at with regards to ideas on modern mediation. In *Jean Baudrillard: Live theory* (2004), Paul Hegarty discusses his views on reality. Looking at how contemporary society is dominated by mass media, his theories revolve around ideas of simulation. "For Baudrillard, there has never been any unmediated reality" (Hegarty 2004:49), instead of experiencing reality, he believes there are only experiences of simulations of reality, or 'hyperrealities'. "A simulation is a copy or imitation that substitutes for reality" and "the hyperreal is something 'more real than real': something fake and artificial that comes to be more definitive of the real than reality itself" (Freeland 2001:130). Baudrillard maintains that "There has never been a world realer than ours: everywhere reality is enhanced, multiplied, brought to us, we to it, or is recreated (for the first time) in films or computer games", but at the same time this reality is not reality as Hegarty says he: "argues that we have only ever had simulacra of one sort or another, and that there has never been a true real that is known to us" (Hegarty 2004:9).

At the outset this seems to be relevant to photorealism, as photorealism can be argued to be overly concerned with simulating a reality, producing a version that seems 'more real than real'. However, Baudrillard is more focused on media producing this hyperreal state. He does not specifically focus on paintings using this media and so I have chosen not to focus on his ideas. Hegarty also points out the difficulty of Baudrillard's ideas: "Baudrillard's views, whether the reader believes them to be right or wrong, are very difficult to put to use, or to apply directly" (2004:2). For this reason, and because other theorists prove more useful, I will not be using Baudrillard's theories in this study.

Technology as a mediating tool used by four artists: Jan Vermeer, Robert Bechtle, Adriaan van Zyl and Gina Heyer:

"A society is defined by its amalgamations, not by its tools . . . tools exist only in relation to the interminglings they make possible or that make them possible" (Deleuze in Crary 1990:8). It may be obvious to say that tools on their own do little and that their value is in the products and effects of their use. The products I look at here are paintings that are made possible only with the use of certain 'tools' that allow new ways of picturing the world. Among the host of tools developed in service of the visual, from eyeglass lenses dating back to the thirteenth century to the nineteenth century stereoscope and motion picture film camera, only two devices will be studied: the seventeenth century *camera obscura* and contemporary photographic cameras that had their origins in the nineteenth century. I have chosen to focus on these tools as they can be seen as definitive metaphors for fundamental (although gradual) changes in western scopic regimes.¹¹

Crary, in *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1992), departs from the common historical view of the *camera obscura* developing into the photographic camera. He maintains that these two devices reveal very different observing subjects with differing ideologies, social and political power (1992:26). Instead of focusing on the devices themselves, he looks at how the defined and stable position of the observer offered by the *camera obscura* model in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries breaks down in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and results in a new type of observing subject. In this way, I compare the way specific tools are used by seventeenth century Dutch and contemporary western observers in order to see what this reveals about the relationship between reality and painting of each group.

While Crary addresses historical contexts of devices and observers, Svetlana Alpers, in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (1983), relates this historical context to the works of Vermeer and other seventeenth century Dutch artists specifically while still considering the fluctuating debates about reality and artifice that these paintings stir up. She looks at the role of technology such as lenses and the *camera obscura* in these paintings based on the seventeenth century Dutch preoccupation with seeing, representing and describing and maintains that the descriptive veneer holds hidden meanings (Alpers 1983:xix). In this regard, I have chosen to look at the works of Vermeer because his works clearly reveal the *camera obscura* mode of vision. A thorough investigation of the effects of *camera obscura* vision is offered by Philip Steadman's *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces* (2001). Through careful

¹¹ This can be seen in countless texts including Crary's *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1992). The *Camera obscura* model of vision "collapsed in the 1820's and 1830's, when it was displaced by radically different notions of what an observer was, and of what constituted vision" (1992:27). Although Crary maintains that the popular notion of the modernisation of vision seemingly coincides with 1970's and 1980's modernist painting and the development of photography after 1839, he suggests it was already well under way by 1820 (1992:5). For my study, I focus on the shift of vision occurring with the camera vision already starting with the *camera obscura* as this is where I most clearly see the results of this modernisation of vision in painting. The term 'scopic regime' comes from Martin Jay in his chapter 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity' (1988).

analytical observation of Vermeer's few existing paintings and historical contextual records, Steadman establishes how Vermeer used the *camera obscura* and analyses what specific visual effects this produced.

Of the countless ways in which artists have used photography and camera vision since its introduction, I explore only one aspect /result: its influence on increasing levels of verisimilitude to the physical observed world in painting. Relying wholly and in as much detail as possible on an image produced by photography, the American Photorealist or Superrealist movement (Lindey 1980) is an obvious area to look at this influence and will be compared with contemporary versions of photorealism. Like paintings which made use of the *camera obscura*, photorealism raises further questions about the painting's relationship to reality such as whether it can be seen as original or mere copying and the difficult dualism between objectivity and subjectivity set up in these paintings. As modern technology has made producing and reproducing images of reality so easy, it becomes increasingly necessary to look at why artists still painstakingly reproduce the photographic image in paint and why these paintings may be valuable. This is addressed by Christine Lindey's *Superrealist: Painting and Sculpture* (1980) which dispels the claim that photorealism is mere copying and argues that there are important changes in transformation from photograph to painting that make this art form still relevant and contemporary (1980:13,20).

For an overview of how photography has revolutionised vision I refer to *The Painter and the Photograph: From Delacroix to Warhol* (1972) by Van Deren Coke and *Ways of Seeing* (1972) by Berger. Both texts look at the way photography has mobilised images and how the mass production of images changes their meaning. Berger says: "Because of the camera, the painting now travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting. In its travels, its meaning is diversified"(1972:20). New contexts including titles, price tags, reproductions, cropping, juxtaposition with other art, images and words change the way contemporary viewers see and think about art (Berger 1972:28,29,32,33).

To illustrate these ideas, I look at three contemporary artists whose works are similar in their architectural subject matter and technique. A dominant theme in American Photorealist painter Robert Bechtle's (1932-) paintings are lonely empty streets and cars. Van Zyl's (1957-2006) work includes abandoned mining buildings and vacant hospital interiors. My own work consists of almost empty passages and rooms, but "Although vacant, all the spaces speak of human endeavour" (Minnaar 2010:12). All three artists have at some stage included the human subject in their work, but for this study, I am interested in works that only refer to the absence of human presence as they invite the viewer to construct their own narrative and to wonder. In Lize van Robbroeck's essay written for the posthumous exhibition catalogue *Adriaan van Zyl* (2007) she says of his hospital paintings: "In these haunted spaces ringing with the silence of utter abandonment, we confront the disturbing fact of our own mortality" (Hunt & Botha 2007:50) and they "become instruments of empathy and compassion" (Hunt & Botha 2007:49).

A further reason for choosing to look at the work of Bechtle is that there are substantial texts about his work. This is a limitation when writing about my own work and the work of Van Zyl as both have not had the chance (in Van Zyl's case due to his untimely death) to produce significant

volumes of work to generate quantities of published texts. A catalogue each and an article or two are the only sources I have at my disposal. As 'realism' may still not be a popular choice among art academia, Van Robbroek's essay is valuable in that it revitalises "Adriaan's painting in the context of present day wholesale rejection of the relevance of realism" (Hunt & Botha 2007:8). In exploring how each of these artists engage with photorealism in subtly different ways I hope to show that they offer unique and valuable contributions to this on-going discourse.

Emotive responses to photorealistic paintings:

As emotive responses to paintings are typically wordless and highly subjective, they become incredibly difficult to theorise. While being aware of this difficulty, many theorists offer valuable insights on the emotional powers of images. In addition, Bechtle, Van Zyl, and I reflect as active practitioners and Ernst Gombrich (1950) offers some viewpoints on what the artist may gain and hope to achieve from the process of painting. Furthermore, a handful of possible theories relating to the emotive response viewers may have when looking at photorealistic paintings are offered. These include the suspension of disbelief, the uncanny, the *punctum*, bringing together the contradictory states of the live and the dead, and the sublime.

Contradictory states seen in the suspension of disbelief and the bringing together of the dead and the live, as proposed by Barthes (1981) and Gerry Badger (2007), may be important factors in encouraging emotive responses. Immanuel Kant (in Wenzel 2005) maintains that a state of disinterestedness is important in aesthetic judgements, but this is something that Elkins opposes in *The Object Stares Back* (1996). For Sigmund Freud (1919 (2001); 1955) paintings may have something uncanny in that they may seem unfamiliar and yet simultaneously familiar. For Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981) emotive response is described as a 'puncturing' or '*punctum*', but this *punctum* is unlocatable. For Edmund Burke (1776) and Kant (1952 (1790); 1987; in Shaw 2006) it may be in an experience of the sublime.¹²

Slavoj Žižek (2003) argues that the sublime borders on the ridiculous. Theorists such as Barthes (1981) and Elkins (1998) maintain that images resist textual codification and analysis. Elkins emphasises the emotional experience of looking at paintings and maintains that words detract from this experience.¹³ For Elkins (2001) the emotive response is perhaps in the evidence that viewers have cried in front of paintings. Although often leaning towards the sentimental, Elkins in *Pictures and Tears* (2001), is useful to my study in that he addresses the effects of technology such as mass colour reproduction and the large-scale dissemination of art historical information

¹² The concept of the sublime has gained popularity in recent years, but has been a preoccupation among writers since Dionysius Longinus first proposed it as a concept in his *Peri Hupsos* (*On Sublimity*) written in 1965 (Shaw 2006:4). Main theorists of the sublime include Burke (1776), Kant (1952 (1790)), Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Žižek (2003), but only three will be investigated in this study.

¹³ In *Pictures and Tears* Elkins opposes the experience of an artwork to the intellectualising of it; "By imperceptible steps, art history gently drains away a painting's sheer wordless visceral force, turning it into an occasion for intellectual debate. What was once an astonishing object, thick with the capacity to mesmerise, becomes a topic for a quiz show, or a one-liner at a party, or the object of a scholar's myopic expertise" (2001:92).

on the viewer's experience of art and reality. Contemporary art, he argues, is repeatedly mediated by technology, resulting in a numbing effect and so offering fewer occasions for emotive responses (Elkins 2001:77).

1.5. Chapter breakdown

This introductory chapter has suggested that to definitively understand reality is an impossible undertaking. Rather than an attempt to define, I hope to illuminate some aspects of reality through the careful application of selective interpretive theories.

Chapter Two will explore the difference between the visual perception and interpretation of reality in a painting. This chapter aims to contextualise my later discussion of individual artists' works by providing an overview of certain debates surrounding reality. I look at the relationship photorealism and photography may have to the physical world in a mechanical sense and how the viewer makes sense of these varying levels of reality and artifice through philosophical interpretation. Contemporary and historical ideas on the mechanics of human visual perception and interpretation strategies will be negotiated and compared. The theorists looked at in this chapter each offer different approaches to understanding reality but there are relevant points of contact between them specifically related to analysing pictures. In this chapter I hope to give a clear indication of what I understand the term reality to mean, and to examine shifts in thinking about representation and negotiating reality in painting. Furthermore, I locate contemporary photorealism in relation to selected movements or artistic attitudes within art history such as naturalism, Realism, Photorealism, Superrealism, Hyperrealism and *Trompe l'oeil*, exploring the similarities and differences.

Chapter Three and the first two parts of Chapter Four focus on two key devices used by painters to assist them in picturing, and thus mediating, reality. Chapter Three is centered on the way in which the *camera obscura* was used by Vermeer to mediate his reality. I will argue that the *camera obscura* changed the way painters could depict reality, the effects of which can be seen in Vermeer's paintings. The *camera obscura* also had implications on Dutch seventeenth century understanding of reality. Looking at these early changes in vision, the perception of reality and painting the real will help to contextualise more recent shifts in scopic regimes, which will be addressed in the following chapter.

Chapter Four is divided into three distinct parts. The first section looks at how the introduction of photography has further affected the dominant scopic regime in western culture. The proliferation and use of photography is met with challenges, as will be addressed, such as the 'death of painting' and the numbing effect of mass produced images (Elkins 2001). Chapter Four continues to examine how reality is negotiated through photography in Bechtle, Van Zyl and my own paintings. The time and attention given to painting and 'slowing down' a mass producible image transforms this image into unique painted objects and may reinvest an otherwise disposable image with the potential for emotive responses. In the last section of this chapter, I will show how it is in the veiling of the technology used and in the bringing together of multiple contradictions that the paintings of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself may have an emotional effect on the viewer.

Through analysing the ways in which camera vision helps artists and viewers to negotiate the real in painting I will explore how photorealism can be a meaningful art form today. In order to do this I first unpack a range of connections a photorealistic painting may have to 'the real'.



Chapter Two: Negotiating the real

2.1. Perception and interpretation: connecting reality, painting and theory

The relationship between a photorealistic painting¹⁴ and the physical world it seems to represent is complex. Arguably the main philosophical contradiction of these paintings, paintings such as Bechtle's *Six Houses on Mound Street* (fig 1) and Van Zyl's *Arrival* (fig 2), is the distinction between appearances and reality: between what things seem to be and what they really are. Because of the inevitable gap between what paintings depict and what they are, they remain curious objects that vacillate between the real and the unreal.

Explanations of the term 'reality' are often broad, contradictory and vague. In common dictionary definitions, reality relates to the existence and experience of physical, actual and factual things, "the quality of being lifelike", "the state or quality of having existence or substance", but also to subjective beliefs, mental states and perceptions (Oxford Dictionaries: reality 2010c:n.pag.). Reality could be entirely constructed via consensus or reality could be consistent, concrete, and it is rather the interpretations that are variable. Reality is contrasted with idealism, imagination, non-existence, possibility, and illusion and according to Baudrillard (in Hegarty 2004 and Moriarty 1991) what viewers commonly understand as reality may not exist at all. The multi-valency of this term considered, limiting reality to one definition proves unfeasible.

A more useful strategy for this study is to look at the nature of the relationship between a photorealistic painting and various concepts of reality. In order to do this, a theoretical distinction needs to be made between seeing or visual perception and visual processing or interpretation as this seems to be where many theorists misinterpret one another. Although these areas overlap and to separate them is an artificial divide, this purely theoretical approach may help in understanding how certain theories such as mimesis and semiotics may be applied in useful ways.¹⁵ This division distinguishes between physical reality,¹⁶ in the sense of physical, actual, existent things, mechanical visual processes, and the interpretive realities the viewer constructs when trying to make sense of these things. The body and mind are inseparable, but as a thought experiment, the reader is asked to temporarily suspend their disbelief.

¹⁴ I refer to photorealism here as specific paintings that use photographs as source material and meticulously copy them in as much detail as possible. This is to be distinguished from the Photorealist art movement of the 1960's and 70's. The photographs used are generally recognisable with minimal distortion and abstraction thus producing generally naturalistic images.

¹⁵ Crary argues one of the reasons this distinction can possibly be made is that: "perception doesn't really change, rather it is the social network within which vision occurs" (1992:6).

¹⁶ Philip K. Dick's statement that "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" may have application to the physical reality I refer to here (in Greenberg, Koole & Pyszczynski 2004:355).

Many theories can be applied in an attempt to understand photorealism's connection to the real. Only a few will be looked at and are chosen because of their relevance to debates around reality in relation to painting. These include naturalism, reflection, representation, mimesis and imitation, denotation and connotation, imagination, 'seeing-in' and 'twofoldness' and semiotic theories. Each theory has its merits and I will argue for a combined approach.¹⁷ Using the correct terminology proves difficult in that many terms have multiple meanings. To the layperson the most obvious terms associated with photorealism may be that these paintings appear to be 'realistic', 'real' or 'true-to-life'. In more theoretical terms, they may be 'mimetic', 'naturalistic', 'semiotic' or just 'copies', however these are broad terms in need of clarification and elaboration.

Some photorealistic paintings and photographs could be seen as naturalistic in that they appear to mimic the visible world as closely as possible. One interpretation clarifies naturalism as: "A style in which an artist intends to represent a subject as it appears in the natural world — precisely and objectively — as opposed to being represented in a stylized or intellectually manipulated manner" (Delahunt 2010:n.pag.). Both realism and naturalism reject idealism, but realism need not be naturalistic in that it can be true to real life social situations in subject matter and not painterly technique.

Terms such as 'imitation' and 'mimesis', also associated with photorealistic paintings, seem to imply the opposite of nature and reality. Schwartz maintains:

mimesis involves similarity between its product and what it represents; yet, in this 'material' artificiality, it also involves dissimilarity. And our perception of this dissimilarity cues an aesthetic response - a response to a work of art rather than a response to an actuality. (1968:345).

These paintings embody the real and are the same time its very opposite in not being the real object or place that is depicted.

Mimesis is a key term common to both Plato and Aristotle. Today it is still central to debates around aesthetics and the relationship of art to reality and so is relevant to explore in relation to contemporary photorealism. In early interpretations, such as those offered by Plato and Aristotle, mimesis is seen as a representation or imitation of nature. For Plato (1989), the 'founding father' of mimeticism, authentic reality and truth are abstract notions that do not exist in the world of physical things but rather in an abstract realm of ideas. Thus, the physical world is comprised of copies and the artist who imitates these things creates objects three times removed from truth and reality.¹⁸ The artwork, for Plato, is therefore deceptive, superficial and imperfect

¹⁷ It should however be mentioned that although applying theoretical analyses is greatly useful in gaining understanding, it is not necessarily a means to full interpretation of a painting. This view is held by Elkins (1998) and Barthes (in Moriarty 1991) who both argue that paintings are opaque and resistant to words but agree that interpretations are helpful.

¹⁸ Due to the limits of this thesis, I have oversimplified Plato's general idea. I recognise, as Stephen Halliwell reminds the reader, that Plato's ideas on mimesis are "far from straightforward and uniform" and "much more complex and much less easily condensed into a unified point of view than is normally supposed" (2002:24). This similarly applies to Aristotle's views.

because it is a move away from truth, a copy of an already imperfect world. At best, the tangible fruit of any human labour is "an indistinct expression of truth" (Plato 1989:22).

In Aristotle's view, "It is in creating after the *manner* of nature that art imitates nature" (emphasis in original)(in Schwartz 1968:345). Aristotle believes that although imitation cannot perfectly copy an original it has a valuable function (in Richter 1989:44). An imitation is a "creative process of selection, translation, and transformation from one idea to another", and brings about pleasure for the viewer (Richter 1989:44). The viewer learns lessons about the truth of human existence, which contrary to Plato's view is to be found in the observable universe (Richter 1989:44).

Sörbom maintains that mimesis has never been a unified theory on its own but was rather a basic conceptual consensus, a "fundamental outlook shared by most authors, philosophers and educated audiences in the classical period, in antiquity as a whole, and even later" (Sörbom 2002:19). As an activity, mimesis is found in painting, sculpture, theatre performances, music, poetry and other forms (Sörbom 2002:19). The term has however been used synonymously with "*mimema* (imitation), *eikon* (image), *homoïoma* (likeness)" to name a few (Sörbom 2002:19). Ancient mimetic theory distinguishes *mimemata* (the results of the mimetic activity, i.e. a painting) from real things: a painting may look like a house but it is not a house. Moriarty maintains that:

'Mimesis', of course, is 'imitation', which is, in the Aristotelian view, the relationship between a literary text or other artefact and reality outside it. The text, in other words, is held to copy reality. The term 'realism' is frequently used as an appropriate synonym of 'mimesis'. It sometimes denotes a quality attributed to those texts that are thought to be successful imitations of reality. (Moriarty 1991:128).

There is a danger however to simplify mimesis/'to imitate' to literally mean 'to copy' (Schwartz 1986:345 & Sörbom 2002:25) as mimesis rests on the fact that it is similar and dissimilar to reality and a copy aims at similarity and simulation only. Copies, such as vehicles off an assembly line, are essentially identical whereas imitations, such as artificial flowers, may be similar to their referent (the flower in nature) but have important differences (their material properties).

Mimesis has a further meaning as a form of *aisthesis*; the forming of mental images presented to the mind by individual things (Sörbom 2002:20). These mental images are necessary for apprehension. Sörbom elaborates on this process: "In perception the object presses its form without its matter upon the mind of the perceiver and creates thereby a mental image in his or her mind. In a way, the production of pictures and *mimemata* is the reverse order of perception: the skilled hands of the painter or sculptor model the matter to coincide with the mental image" (2002:24). In making mimetic artefacts and mental images (and photographs for that matter), there is an imprinting of information (without its true materials) from the material world into the mind of the observer, the artist's canvas or the photograph. In this interpretation mimesis seems to have a metaphorical similarity to the mechanical or perceptual functioning of the eye or camera, as will be elaborated on shortly.

Physical relationships of painting to reality:

When humans open their eyes and take in the visual array of what is around them, many complex processes are taking place that allow perception, recognition, understanding and interpretation of that visual information. To understand this process, and hence what is happening when a painting is viewed, I will begin by briefly exploring the mechanics of how humans see.

Simply put, scientific (and arguably common) knowledge today accepts visual perception as a process where light reflected off of objects travels through the pupil and reaches the retina at the back of the eye (Ranpura s.a.:1). Previous views held that it was the objects themselves that imprinted their images into the eye. Arnheim maintains that in photographs "the *physical objects themselves* imprint their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light" (own emphasis)(1974:154-155). However, more common views today such as those of Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen disagree, it is rather "the light reflected by the objects and refracted by the lens which is the agent in the process, not 'the physical objects themselves'" (1975:151).¹⁹ The pattern of light hitting the retina corresponds point-to-point with the objects from which the light travels and is thus projected upside-down and back-to-front (Ranpura s.a.:1-2). If the viewer (and thus the aperture) moves, the pattern of light moves in a corresponding way.

At this stage, vision resembles the *camera obscura* model²⁰ of light travelling through a tiny aperture and creating an inverted image opposite the aperture. This became the Renaissance model for how the eye worked. In this model, it was believed that a painting could be a 'copy' of the retinal image, and hence reflection, mimetic, imitation and mirroring theories have a certain logic to them. Blinder illustrates this view:

Just as we see a replica of the three-dimensional world by means of an accurate perspectival painting, so it was held, we naturally see the world by means of a 'picture painted on the back of the eye' by reflected light. So there could be, at least in principle, perfect resemblance between pictorial and retinal image. Both are two-dimensional projections of the three-dimensional world. In effect, realistic pictures could be said to 'copy' the retinal image. (1986:21).

This however is only part of how visual perception works. The binocular fact of human vision, opposed to the monocular vision of a camera, results in the human seeing two slightly different images simultaneously and the camera only one. Light projected onto the light sensitive rod and cone cells of the retina is converted into electrochemical signals²¹ that are mostly sent from the

¹⁹ This is a useful distinction to make because in taking a photograph the objects may not necessarily change but the photographer can manipulate the way the reflected light is recorded and so the same set of objects can yield many different looking images.

²⁰ Ideas about how vision works before and after the seventeenth century *camera obscura* model of vision will be looked at in the following chapter.

²¹ Descartes importantly also understood natural vision as transmitting and processing *signals* from the retina to the brain rather than supporting the traditional idea of the mind *seeing* retinal images (Blinder 1986:21). See Blinder's article *In Defense of Pictorial Mimesis* (1986) for a useful summary of how some understanding of models of vision have gradually changed.

optic nerve "via the thalamus to the cerebral cortex, where visual perception occurs" (Ranpura s.a.:1). It is in the mind then that the viewer processes, registers and recognises what they are seeing in terms of light and dark areas, colour, discriminating lines and edges, shadows, fine structure, contrast, motion and orientation. Rather than 'seeing' the retinal image, the mind processes this visual data.²²²³

At the point where visual information is grouped and ordered to make some kind of sense in the viewer's mind, there could be a process of what Wollheim (1987) refers to as *seeing-in*: a natural awareness of resemblance (1987:47). This is how he explains that a viewer may see faces in clouds, in the grain of wood or in a painting (Wollheim 1987:47). As a natural process, this comes prior to representation and the playing of games of make-believe (Wollheim 1987:47). Walton, however, maintains that to see an object requires "authorised games" of imagining or make-believe to see a depiction in a work as an object (1990:279). These views border on the difficult edge of distinguishing between perception and interpretation.

For now, I return to the mechanical processes involved in perception. Depth perception is twofold in images: it involves observing the two-dimensionality of the painted surface and the illusion of three-dimensionality. Due to the discrepancies of objects' positions in the image signals from each eye, physical depth can be calculated via triangulation (Ranpura s.a.:1-2). Ranpura argues that in part of the process of visual perception, the cells of the primary visual cortex:

are organised retinotopically, which means that *a point-to-point map exists between the retina and the primary visual cortex*, and neighbouring areas in the retina correspond to neighbouring areas in V1 [the primary visual cortex]. *This allows V1 to position objects in two dimensions of the visual world, horizontal and vertical*. The third dimension, depth, is mapped in V1 by comparing the signals from the two eyes. (own emphasis)(s.a.:1).²⁴

Although these are only some of the complex processes taking place, it helps to explain what is happening when a photograph or a photorealistic painting such as Bechtle's *Six Houses on Mound*

²² "Vision happens when the mind correlates the signs it receives from the eye with the properties of things in the world" (Blinder 1986:21-22).

²³ In these definitions, I am referring to ordinary general views of sight. There are exceptions such as hallucinations, visual disorders, 'after-images' (Goethe in Crary 1992:67-68) and images in dreams that function differently. For this study, I am focusing on the kind of visual perception that happens when *actually* and *physically* viewing a painting.

²⁴ It may be tempting to think of human perception in fixed mechanical terms but it remains incredibly adaptable and perhaps not yet entirely understood. Two brief examples of the adaptability of the perceptual processes are noted by the neuroscientist journalist and researcher Ashish Ranpura (s.a.). In scanning a scene, he notices how the viewer's eyes move in short jumps known as 'saccades' to prevent seeing the scene as a blur (this seems to have a correlation to viewing motion in successive film images as opposed to a single long exposure photograph of a moving subject). The viewer also has the ability to perceive colour as constant even when local lighting conditions change (s.a.1-2).

Street (Fig 1) is being viewed. The pattern of light recorded by a photograph has a close but not identical correlation to the pattern of light a viewer would see in the physical world.²⁵

In this sense, the mimetic and resemblance theories hold. Alan Goldman's version of resemblance theory is explained as follows: "A painting represents a certain object if and only if its artist [successfully] intends by marking the canvas with paint to create visual experience in viewers that resembles the visual experience they would have of the object" (in Eldridge 2003:32).²⁶ The illusion of a photograph then matches one part of visual perception closely: it mimics the point-to-point correlation between the light bouncing off of patches of light and dark and colour in a photograph - to retinal image - to information in the visual cortex, and patches of light and dark and colour bouncing off of actual objects - to retinal image - to information in the visual cortex. In this way, a photograph or photorealistic painting can seem to look real.

A theory of mimesis is then also partially valid: "The mimetic theorist holds that a picture realistically represents a scene insofar as the picture looks sufficiently like what the scene would look like to an observer" (Blinder 1986:20). The difficulty with this theory is in defining what is *sufficient*. One wonders whether it is sufficient for an artwork to just mimic the two-dimensional aspects of vision or if it needs to mimic the three-dimensional aspects too, something Duchamp may have solved by introducing the ready-made into galleries. With this in mind, Blinder maintains that mimetic theory needs to be revised as it is not trying to equate paintings and reality (1986:20). A painting can mimic the *look* of the physical world: "Properly constructed, the mimetic claim is that the resemblance relation holds between the *look* of realistic pictures and things they depict, not between two-dimensional images and three-dimensional reality" (emphasis in original) (Blinder 1986:20).

Due to the direct action of light bouncing off objects and into the human eye or onto light sensitive photographic paper, photorealism can have another kind of relationship to reality. The photograph, and arguably the photorealistic painting, may serve as indexical proof that something has existed. This is proposed by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981) when he says: "Painting can feign reality without having seen it" but "in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (emphasis in original)(Barthes 1981:76). Similarly, Snyder and Allen maintain that "a photograph may not show us a scene as we ourselves would have seen it, but it is a reliable index of what [a particular thing] *was*" (emphasis in original)(1975:149,163).²⁷

²⁵ The exception here would be heavily distorted or blurred photographs that depart quite drastically from how the physical world is perceived. It seems the large majority of photographs however correspond closely to the arrangement of light bouncing off objects perceived in the physical world.

²⁶ Goldman ignores the fact that other more abstracted visual forms can represent objects (such as logos representing companies or Nelson Goodman's example of a bottle cap representing a player in a team (in Eldridge 2003:32)) but in terms of photorealism this view holds.

²⁷ Arnheim's notion that paintings can show things the way they would have appeared to a viewer had they been there themselves is disputed. According to Snyder and Allen, this position "has to be qualified to the point of absurdity" to be true (1975:151-152). However due to the adaptability and imaginative potential of the human mind in processing information I maintain that it is possible to some degree to say a typical photograph shows a viewer things as they would have seen them or some derivative of how they would

In part, it shows the viewer what they would have seen, but in mimicking only the two-dimensional aspects of vision in representing objects and spaces, the painting may deny the way objects are naturally seen in three dimensions. At the same time, due to viewing the painting through two eyes, the viewer becomes aware of the photograph or painting as a flat surface, as a physical object itself. Wollheim refers to this as 'twofoldness' (1987:46). Eldridge interprets Wollheim's notion of 'twofoldness' as the viewer being "aware of both the surface looked at *and* some presented something that seems to stand out from in or behind the surface" (emphasis in original)(2003:37), an illusion of depth and actual depth.

There is another way a viewer may perceive depth due to the familiarity of the everyday human experience of three-dimensional space. Blinder says humans do not see flat because when the physical world is statically viewed from one eye only, and thus depth perception is eliminated, rather than a "flat patchwork of colors" the viewer is seeing "the surfaces of the world that are viewed now from here" (1986:24). Perspective illusion in a painting works because instead of seeing, for example, different sized bricks laid out on a road, they are perceived instead as equally sized but progressively further away. The photograph may not serve as proof of exact distances between objects, but the illusion still works because, as Gombrich says:

we usually have a fair idea of the order of magnitude of the objects in our environment and hence of their size and distance in pictures, at least those which represent people or houses, animals, flowers or fruit. We thus normally approach any arrested image with the confidence of being able to solve its implicit equation at least approximately - and we are not frequently jolted out of our complacency. (1980:241).

This is where, although two-dimensional, a painting or photograph manages to produce a sense of depth. The human imagination, with its stored memory of familiar experience recognises objects and perceives them as existing at various distances.

Philosophical relationships of painting to reality:

So far, the focus of this chapter has mainly been on the mechanical physical relationship of a photorealistic painting to reality. Reflection, new art history and semiotic theories focus on interpretation; on more philosophical ideas surrounding 'reality' as an idea or construct. The way humans see may seem natural and automatic, but for semioticians,

the relation between pictorial signs and the things they signify is held to be semantic, not casual. Casual relations hold regardless of our knowledge of them. Semantic relations depend upon our understanding and employing the 'language' in which they are embedded. Signs are always relative to an interpretive schema, and the informative content of the signs depends upon the subject's familiarity with the schema. (Blinder 1986:22).

have seen them had they been there. Arguably, for the layperson a photograph may appear to be a more accurate record or representation of how something may have looked when compared to a diagram or sketch.

Thus "pictorial signs are not intrinsically (i.e., naturally) meaningful. Their meaning depends on their role in a representational system, brought by the artist or the viewer to the work" (Blinder 1986:22). For Nelson Goodman, pictures then are more like maps than mirrors, and his ultimate claim is that "Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time" (in Blinder 1986:24).

A question that emerges is whether the observed relationship of a photorealistic painting to physical empirical reality is automatic and natural as implied by mimetic theory, reflective of social and ideological reality, or if it is entirely based on constructed signs as implied by semiotics.

That a representation can be an exact mirroring or reflection of reality, it is suggested, is a misinterpretation of the word. Pam Morris, writing about realist literature, indicates this:

There is one distinction between realist writing and actual everyday reality beyond the text that must be quite categorically insisted upon: realist novels *never* give us life or a slice of life nor do they reflect reality. In the first place, literary realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents. (emphasis in original)(Morris 2003:4).

As has been mentioned, a representation or imitation is different to a copy. To represent reality may not mean to imitate it exactly: to create an exact duplicate. An exact duplicate would be a copy (again an example would be identical cars off an assembly line). A representation or imitation copies something but not in every respect. Part of the representation/imitation is an awareness of its artifice: awareness that the representation is not what it represents. Some photorealistic paintings start to blur this distinction in that they can imitate the photograph so accurately that the viewer might never realise it is a painting they are looking at.

It would seem that photorealistic paintings might reflect as mirrors do; not only reflecting appearances but also cultural ideologies. Reflection theory applied in a different manner is often used by art historians who concentrate on works as "carriers of meanings" and "as vehicles for cultural values" (Gretton 1986:70). In this way, a photorealistic painting could reflect cultural and ideological realities. Gretton sums this up:

The carriage of meaning is a complex issue. Art historians tend to approach it using a more or less naive version of reflection theory; works of art are said to reflect values, ideas, beliefs and ideologies of a particular social group, nation or even 'age', or to reflect social processes or social realities of one sort or another. Reflection theories and versions of them which say that works of art 'express' such things are adequate in world-views which see cultural systems as being in an essentially passive relationship to the 'real' world. (Gretton 1986:70).

For those who think that ideas somehow exist independently of their expressions, reflection theory is unproblematical. For a variety of reasons such simple views are increasingly unconvincing. We have come to view the totality of practices and artefacts which constitute culture (and this inevitably includes those paintings and similar objects

which we call 'art') as constituting or constructing value systems, beliefs and ideologies, rather than reflecting or expressing them. (Gretton 1986:70)

From a new art history²⁸ perspective, assuming "that artworks merely reflect or mirror a real world fundamentally located elsewhere" reductively underplays "both the *material reality* of artworks themselves and the active role these have in influencing the behaviour, values, and social identity of their viewers" (emphasis in original)(Harris 2001:167). For new art history, art is an active component in constructing reality.²⁹

Furthermore, it is believed that "cultural artefacts make the world, as well as being made by it" (Gretton 1986:70).³⁰ In Gormally and Gerrish Nunn's views, a painting's link to reality according to a New Art History approach sees that "paintings are about politics, religion, sex, money, social class, as well as aesthetics" (1986:70). An artwork's connection to reality extends beyond what is plainly visible. For New Art Historians the reality of an artwork includes the "broader social circumstances of their production and reception" (Burgin 1986:41).

Similarly, semiotic approaches claim that meaning and truth are not inherent properties of things but are rather socially constructed. Semiotic theory, introduced by de Saussure and Peirce, has spanned both structuralism and post-structuralism (Crow 2003). According to this theoretical approach, a photorealistic painting can be seen as a kind of pictorial text consisting of visual signs that are organised into systems within certain contexts (Crow 2003:16). These signs can be 'read' in order to de-code their, and the painting's meaning (Crow 2003:16). As a set of signs, a painting may refer to other signs, within the painting and beyond it. Harris sees Mieke Bal's interpretation of a text as "potentially any item of signification in a society", and that "a visual artwork may be understood as a 'text' in the sense that as an artefact it can be interpreted, or 'read', in the same way that an actual written text like a novel or poem may be" (Harris 2001:184). Visual signs are referred to as 'iconic' because they resemble the thing they represent but the relationship between some signs is arbitrary, symbolic and connected by cultural agreement alone (Crow 2003:33). Meaning is brought about through the interpretation of signs:

²⁸ New art history offers a broad and multidisciplinary approach and explores developments in methods, approaches, theories and objects of study both within and outside of an academic context. According to Jonathan Harris it comprises: "(a) Marxist historical, political, and social theory, (b) feminist critiques of patriarchy and the place of women within the historical and contemporary societies, (c) psychoanalytic accounts of visual representations and their role in 'constructing' social and sexual identity, and (d) semiotic (in Britain, 'semiological') and structuralist concepts and methods of analysing signs and meanings" (2001:7). Although new art history is quite broad and develops ideas on marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and post colonialism, for this study only certain points are touched on.

²⁹ We can now see cultural forms as the space in which people came, and come, to understand the circumstances in which they live, rather than as the space in which such an understanding, achieved elsewhere by another process, is reflected. (Gretton 1986:70).

³⁰ However, Gretton stresses the point that artworks do not construct culture because they are artworks, as many things that are not specifically artworks such as adverts and posters also construct culture (1986:70-71). Artworks may be seen as "special sorts of signifiers" but this does not place them in a hierarchy with other images and cultural artefacts (Gretton 1986:71).

A dialectical relationship between reader and text is suggested, since the words, divorced from the writer as marks on paper devoid of meaning, demand a reader to actualize their meaning potential. It is not however, a rewriting of the text. The act of reading is the re-creation, or synthesis, of constructs referential to certain artificial and conventional signs, which in themselves have no meaning or function until assimilated through a reading consciousness. (Trifonas 2003:n.pag.)

Although signs may be constructed, this view implies that the signs are composed of fixed units and relationships that are easily identifiable in a painting just as words and syllables are identified in a text. Trifonas illustrates this in a semiotic reading of Picasso's *Guernica*: "Just as lexical text is constituted of the sum of individual features that work to create meaning as a whole, the visual or pictorial text of *Guernica* is comprised of readily identifiable elements that create a meaningful integrated form of expression" (2003:n.pag.). He turns to Gombrich and Saint Martin in his analysis:

The cumulative effect of two sets of visual variables, plastic and perceptual, upon the perception process, isolates the latent properties of the colors, figures, and forms virtually present in the viewer's store of culturally determined visual encyclopaedic knowledge Color, value and texture are plastic variables while line, shape, form, vectorality (focal point and directional tension) and implantation (position/balance) are perceptual variables Exploring the general relations between these colors, figures, and forms in a particular pictorial text creates an awareness of how the visual variables determined through the formal structure of the work interact with respect to the perceptual processes of the viewer and engender meaningful visual experiences. (Trifonas 2003:n.pag.)

This interpretation seems too easy in assuming that it is possible to reduce a painting, and a viewer's mind into classifiable components. Although his analysis covers diverse aspects ranging from the relationships of formal elements within the painting to relating these forms to broader social and political issues, Trifonas seems confident that through his interpretation he has discovered what this painting means because he has analysed all its signs, their relationships and what they signify. Rather than an encyclopaedic visual knowledge, the viewer surely has a more fragmentary 'store' coloured by emotion and association and therefore not as easily definable as a metaphoric retrieving of information from a visual filing cabinet in the viewer's mind and matching the information. A reader may wonder how Trifonas might interpret one of Mark Rothko's colour-field paintings.

In interpreting what a sign or subject of a photograph or painting may be, John Szarkowski reminds the viewer that the subject "is not the figure or the room, or the shape and graphic weight of the light window against the dark ground, but every element within the frame, and their precisely just relationship" (1975:65). Although Peirce acknowledges that signs are negotiated, not always fixed in their meanings due to individual backgrounds of readers (Crow 2003:36), the impression is still that paintings can be reduced to signs and can thus be understood.

Barthes maintains that although certain codes affect how an image is read, the photograph is essentially "an image without code", and that "to ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis" (1981:88). The semiotic approach is similarly criticised by Elkins in *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (1998). He maintains that:

if pictures are orderly systems of signs, then semiotics can be said to be an optimal tool; but if there is something partly irrational and opaque about the building blocks of signs, then semiotics (and linguistic models in general) may appear more as simplifications than as adequate models. (1998: xiii).

Elkins sees graphic marks and written marks as very different in that the written mark is not dependent on its form in the way a graphic mark is (1998:xiii). "A Graphic mark remains both mysterious (since it is infinitely variable and replete with meaning) and second rate (since it cannot become a legible sign as long as its meaning depends so intimately on its form)" (Elkins 1998:xiii). He maintains that the semiotic systems seem to forget what a picture is, "assimilating pictures to texts and overlooking their painted strangeness" (Elkins 1998:5). For Elkins, graphic marks are neither entirely semiotic nor entirely meaningless and unintelligible but situated somewhere in-between (1998:xiii).

In a similar way, Alpers considers the study of visual representation to "be in the grip of a professionalised and reductive model of 'explanation' based on the simplistic formula that 'visual symbol = meaning'" and that this further separates the artwork's form and context (in Harris 2001:178).³¹ When "for Saussure signification is achieved by using the mental concepts, the signifieds, to categorise reality so that we can understand it" (Crow 2003:38), he does not acknowledge that some things cannot be categorised and understood. Semiotics then may be useful to a degree, "But unless we can somehow acknowledge the great importance of this limit on our explanatory systems, we might as well give up" (Harrison 1986:81).

Barthes also believes that theories for understanding photography (and these theories may extend to photorealism as well) are "fatally reductive" because they do not take into consideration "the individual's relationship to what a particular photograph represents" (in Moriarty 1991:202). Blinder (1986) suggests that pictures and visual experiences work differently to language and so semiotics is not fully applicable to paintings. He maintains:

The crux of the problem with the analogy between signs and pictures is that the information conveyed by a symbol or sign will vary according to the context in which it is functioning and the interpretive system the observers bring to it. Ordinary visual experience (either of the world or of pictures) exhibits no comparable relativity and variation. Vision is a natural capacity, hence unlike our acquired ability to understand a particular language or to diagnose a disease. . . . We simply have no choice about

³¹ Likewise, new art history writer Charles Harrison maintains that there are certain opacities in understandings works of art: "it remains true that the most interesting and difficult thing about the best works of art is that they *are* so good, and that we don't know why or how (though we may know much else about them)" (emphasis in original)(1986:81).

whether and, to a great extent, *how* we see the world when we open our eyes. (emphasis in original)(Blinder 1986:24)

Furthermore, he maintains that the semiotic understanding of pictures is false: "Pictures are informative because the structure of the optic array they produce is intrinsically (naturally) meaningful for perceivers like us in an environment like ourselves" (Blinder 1986:25). This seems to be a valid argument, but perhaps a middle ground may be reached. Perhaps these images may be naturally meaningful, in that they correspond on a mechanical and perceptual level to visually familiar objects and surfaces, *and* culturally meaningful, in that they are contextually specific.

It may then be said that when looking at a photorealistic painting (my artificial division between perception and interpretation applies in this case), part of the experience matches how a viewer perceives the physical world: such as the two-dimensional correlation, including relative sizes of objects that give the illusion of three-dimensions, and part does not (the actual three-dimensional correlation). As the subject matter is familiar to most viewers of photorealistic paintings, the objects and scenarios depicted in them can be instantly recognised. At this point, each viewer may see the same thing.

At the same time, what a viewer sees is interpreted in ways described in the semiotic or connotative sense. For Eldridge, the reason interpretation takes place has to do with the labelling of something as art: "Art products and performances seem in some rough sense to be about something . . . they invite and focus thought", furthermore, "they are intended to set up in an audience a line of thinking about the subject matter" (emphasis in original)(2003:25). These interpretations vary greatly and it is perhaps for this reason that Arthur Danto maintains that each new interpretation constitutes a new work of art (in Janaway 2007:187) even though the physical object of the artwork does not change. Similarly, the artist's choice of what to photograph, which photograph to use as reference and the contexts within which the artwork is made and received affects interpretation. "Writing has to select and order, something had to come first, and that selection and ordering will always, in some way, entail the values and perspective of the describer" (Morris 2003:4). Similarly, the act of painting involves many subjective selections. Artworks, for Eldridge aim at more than mere recording (2003:41). Thus through interpretation of physical reality experienced, meaning is constructed and philosophical realities are formed.

This section has aimed to highlight some of the difficulties in adequately mapping out the connection a photorealistic painting may have to reality and to provide some of the groundwork for the following chapters. There is definitely a correspondence between the physical world and the photorealistic painting, because these paintings provide a partially equivalent optical experience, and because they in some sense serve as a record of the physical world. No one approach is adequate but in combination, both mimesis and semiotics have points of relevance. The connections photorealism may have to reality are *partly* natural and familiar, *partly* semantic and constructed through languages of signs and *partly* opaque and beyond understanding. By seeming so real and yet embodying the very opposite of its real-world counterpart, photorealism remains contradictory in its relationship to reality.

2.2. The real in painting: Realism, Trompe l'oeil, Photorealism, photorealism, Superrealism and Hyperrealism

Changing notions and attitudes towards reality are evident in paintings throughout history. Examining some of the historical matrix of painted versions of reality ranging from Naturalism, to Realism and Photorealism will aid in contextualising and defining contemporary photorealism. Each of these historical movements or attitudes to painting has differing relationships to the real and contemporary photorealism may contain elements of each.

Perhaps the most obvious application of realism in painting has been linked with terms such as naturalism, verisimilitude, and mimesis, where the ultimate quest for a painter is to paint the appearance of things in the physical world in as much detail as possible. Linear perspective, the use of the *camera obscura* and photography aid in this process. The Oxford Dictionary of Art defines 'realism' in its broadest sense: 'realism' is referred to as "naturalism, implying a desire to depict things accurately and objectively" (The Oxford Dictionary of Art 1997:463, s.v. 'realism'). From the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century, the overriding quest for verisimilitude was arguably the main objective of painting. Coke notes how already:

Beginning in the fifteenth century, paintings became increasingly realistic in response to changes in man's views of his environment and position in the universe. He became less spiritually orientated and began to develop a new awareness of the actuality of his physical surroundings. From this concern an artistic tradition arose that centred on the systematic reconstruction of familiar objects and views with meticulous exactitude. (Coke 1972:1).

This quest for verisimilitude is evident in Leonardo da Vinci's statement: "The painter's mind should be like a mirror, which transforms itself into the colour of the thing that it has as its object, and is filled with as many likenesses as there are things placed before it" (in Alpers 1983:46). Although idealised subject matter was often depicted, it was the way in which subject matter was painted that became increasingly accurate in terms of how the physical world is naturally perceived. The use of elaborate methods of perspective construction, formally introduced for use by artists in the fifteenth century by Leon Battista Alberti, and the increasing use of the *camera obscura* by artists such as Vermeer in the seventeenth century aided them in achieving this verisimilitude.

Questioning the real:

The quest for painted verisimilitude to the appearance of the physical world changed along with new notions of what reality was thought to be. Crary points to this shift:

It is only in the early nineteenth century that the juridical model of the camera loses its preeminent authority. Vision is no longer subordinated to an exterior image of the true or the right. The eye is no longer what predicates a 'real world'. (Crary 2001:138).

One of the reasons for this shift was that scientists of the nineteenth century, such as Sir David Brewster, Joseph Plateau, and Gustav Fechner, noticed that the body could produce images or "chromatic events" independently of an external world (Crary 2001:141). Crary maintains that "this discovery allowed them to conceive of an abstract optical experience, that is of a vision that did not represent or refer to objects in the world" (2001:141). Vision was thus not necessarily dependant on the reality of the physical world and so this view led to a greater questioning of visual truth.

Artists associated with New Realism and *Nouveau Réalisme* of the 1960's questioned the reality of a painting in a different way. They maintained that realism is not to be found in creating an illusion (the term 'illusion' is often pitted against 'reality') but rather in actual material properties (The Oxford Dictionary of Art 1997:463, s.v. 'realism'). These artists thus incorporated collage, assemblage of everyday items and avoided creating illusions of three-dimensional space. By so doing, they created artworks made of materials or objects that were presented for exactly what they were. By placing a chair, a photograph of the chair and a dictionary definition of the word 'chair' in a gallery space, Joseph Kosuth's *One and three chairs* (1965) further questions the boundaries of reality in art (Lindey 1980:40).

The Impressionist movement was inspired by the way in which photography captures singular moments in time and can be seen as an important contributor to the ongoing negotiation of reality in painting. As shall be explored in the next chapter, there was already evidence of a modernisation of vision and an impressionistic approach in Vermeer's seventeenth century paintings. The Impressionist painter Camille Pissaro wrote in 1882: "How shall I describe these portraits by Rembrandt and Hals, and this view of Delft by Vermeer, these masterpieces which come so close to Impressionism?" (Schneider 2004:87). Impressions of colour and patches of light created by photographic vision, already evident in Vermeer's work, seem to have influenced the Impressionist's renewed notion of vision. "For the Impressionists, colour was a function of the response to light", it was subject to change and was dependant on the observer's perception (Schneider 2004:87). Impressionism was inspired by the photographic mode of vision; of viewing pre-flattened out patches of tone and colour and inspired by the way photography captures light. This resists the traditional Cartesian perspective approach of meticulously and abstractly constructing linear forms. In this way, Impressionism can be said to be particularly anti-perspectival. Rather than describing form in its exacting linear detail, photography provided a new interpretation of reality, "memoranda" to capture patches of dappled light and to record the instant impression of a scene (Coke 1972:81). Photorealism similarly captures instants but records them differently and could perhaps be seen as a kind of sustained impressionism.

Cubism differs greatly from photorealism in approaches to reality. "For the Cubists the visible was no longer what confronted the single eye, but the totality of possible views taken from points all round the object (or person) being depicted" (Berger 1972:18). In contrast to the monocular and singular 'reality' offered by camera vision (and photorealistic painting in general), the Cubist approach focuses on depicting multiple views of objects as they are known and experienced in space. Robert Hughes sees Cubism as "the first radically new proposition about the way we see that painting had made in almost five hundred years Since the renaissance, almost all

painting had obeyed a convention: that of one-point perspective" (1988:16). The use of collage in Synthetic Cubism similarly draws attention to the reality of the artwork's physical surface.

According to Crary, these alternate models (such as New realism, Impressionism and Cubism) of depicting reality in art did not become dominant:

We are often left with a confusing bifurcated model of vision in the nineteenth century: on one level there is a relatively small number of advanced artists who generated a radically new kind of seeing and signification, while on a more quotidian level vision remains embedded within the same general "realist" strictures that had organized it since the fifteenth century. Classical space is overturned, so it seems, on one hand, but persists on the other. (1992:4).

The new alternative way of seeing was, in Crary's view, much more isolated than the hype generated by the canonised version of Modern art makes it out to be and was thus not dominant in cultural and social life (1992:4).

The invention of film and the cinema can be seen to constitute a further revolution that seemed to bring the experience of real life and its representation closer together. By rapidly projecting successive still images, the illusion of movement and visual experience over time is created. In this way, the experience of viewing a projected *camera obscura* image, the principles of which were already evident over two thousand years ago in Ancient Greece and earlier, could be recorded and replayed, dislocated in time and location from the referent scene. The influence of this discovery cannot be underestimated.

Many artists have embraced film, and now digital technology, merging it with elements of the traditions of painting thus superimposing old and new narratives of perceived reality. In Andrew Putter's video installation, *Secretly I Will Love You More*, (2007), the viewer can see a woman subtly moving as a projected image as she sings a Khoi Khoi love song-lullaby. Although a video projection, her pose, clothing and size of the projected image seem to reference traditional portrait painting. Many artists such as Tanya Poole and William Kentridge record the painting or drawing process in order to create stop-frame animations.

On a broader level, this technology now enters most western homes and becomes a major part of how the reality and make believe of the rest of the world is experienced.³² Incorporating actual movement into an artwork changes how it is experienced. Film unfolds over time: "In a film the way one image follows another, their succession, constructs an argument which becomes irreversible" whereas in the photorealist painting, although often experienced over time, "all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously" (Berger 1972:26).

³² Issues around the influence of motion pictures on contemporary western society have been taken up by authors such as Neal Gabler in *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (1998) and would be a fascinating area of study but one that cannot be entered into in this study.

Whether it is through movement, impressions or multiple images, these artists radically reassess and question reality in relation to vision in diverse ways and produce paintings that reflect these changes in thinking.

Taking verisimilitude to the extreme:

Painters adopting *Trompe l'oeil* techniques had a different approach to reality. By typically choosing subject matter with a shallow field of depth, it becomes less apparent to the viewer that they are looking at a painting of depicted objects, and not the real objects themselves. *Trompe l'oeil* was a term coined in the Baroque period but was a phenomenon already evident in Greek and Roman times. It literally means 'fool the eye' and so the apparent aim of these paintings was to pose as three dimensional reality; to deny the physical properties of the painting itself (see Fig 3).³³ Initially this seems to be the aim of *Trompe l'oeil* paintings.

Norman Bryson "argues that the conventional art history, represented by the studies of E.H. Gombrich, holds that art's signifying capacities had developed, since the fifteenth century at least, in order to more convincingly *imitate* the appearance of objects in the world" (in Harris 2001:171). However, according to Harris, this focus on imitation denies the physical reality of the painting: "the making of marks in line and paint that come to be seen as 'copies' of things in the world leads to the loss of understanding of those marks as marks" (2001:171).

Carol Levine (1998) suggests that not all imitation denies the painted surface. She maintains that it is important that the viewer realises that what they are looking at is a painting: "Whenever painting pretends to be the object it represents, the pretence itself becomes the sole subject-matter of the work. At its most referential, painting becomes self-referential, and in pretending to inhabit the real, painting - paradoxically - draws attention to itself as painting" (Levine 1998:368). Pulling these two types of realities - the seemingly real objects and the physically flat painting - so closely together, creates a strange and enjoyable experience and allows the viewer to appreciate the skill of the deception (Levine 1998:367,368). These paintings would fail to have the desired effect if the viewer did not know they were looking at a painting. Similarly, if a viewer believes they are looking at a photograph and not a photorealistic painting, the work will not have the same enjoyable and contradictory tension. Ironically, Levine sees *Trompe l'oeil* as "intrinsically antirealist mimesis" in that rather than believing the objects to be real it leads the viewer to contemplate its artifice and "compels us to reflect on the making of art" (1998:373).

As a physical object, a photograph is generally flat and therefore has no actual depth. A photorealist painting then is arguably an extreme case of *Trompe l'oeil* painting because it copies these flat photographs. However, unless the photograph has been painted to show that it is itself a flat object, such as indicating the cast shadow of the photograph and the surrounding surface it has been placed on, the effects will not be the same as that of *Trompe l'oeil*. Photorealistic painters, for the most part, choose photographs that depict a greater field of depth than that

³³ This is quite different from the large scale scenes favoured by many Photorealists, whose paintings, while drawing the viewer in, never attempt to trick the eye in quite the same way.

seen in *Trompe l'oeil* paintings. In addition, many photorealistic painters seem to veil the fact that they have painted from a photograph, whether intentional or not, and so it becomes increasingly difficult for the viewer to believe that they are seeing a rendition of a photograph in the *Trompe l'oeil* sense. The photorealistic intention is therefore not the same as that of *Trompe l'oeil*. It is important that the subject matter of photorealism is not about pretending to *be* real but just to *look* real. In so doing, photorealism is able to set up many more subtle tensions for the viewer between the real and artificial rather than just focusing on the art of tricking the eye.

Realism:

Realism (with a capital 'R') is generally seen as a French art movement spearheaded by Gustav Courbet and spanning roughly from 1840 to 1880, but it also occurred in Britain from 1952 to 1956 (Nochlin 1983:13 & Steyn 2008:147), the United States and elsewhere.

Courbet declared in 1861 that 'painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the presentation of *real and existing things*. It is a completely physical language, the worlds of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting.' (Nochlin 1983:23).

This could be seen as a reaction to the frivolous and idealised subject matter of Romanticism. Art depicting the eternal ideal was rejected in favour of raw reality as seen 'here and now'.

"Realism",³⁴ for Juliet Steyn, "suggested a commitment to describing real events, to show things as they actually are or appear to be. It signified the concrete and material in opposition to the abstract and ideal" (2008:146). Realism often had a political and social agenda (Social Realism) depicting the lived experiences and social realities of the working classes. The reality of a Realist painting was in depicting ordinary and familiar subject matter from the everyday lives of the working classes rather than the way in which it was painted. This same attitude can be seen in paintings throughout history and in these cases, realism is referred to with a small letter 'r'. For Berger, presenting typical appearances of the ordinary working classes could reveal "the real relationships and structures of society" (in Steyn 2008:150). Realist paintings were typically not painted with acute attention to detail (as is the case in naturalism and the photographic detail in photorealism): their focus was rather on an attempt to convey a social reality.

Photorealism differs to Realism in that the accurate depiction of the appearances of physical reality is a prerequisite even though they may both convey social realities. Although perhaps focusing on different types of reality (social and visual) both Realism and Photorealism concur with Steyn's statement that "Realism was formulated as a transparent medium which depicts and captures a world 'out there'. The artist takes as subject matter a particular slice of life and makes a study of it" (2008:150). (Although 'transparent' seems to imply 'objective' and 'truthful', which according to the post-structuralist theory examined earlier, are impossibilities).

³⁴ Definitions are never entirely agreed on but my definition of Realism here aims to covers the broadest areas of consensus. Juliet Steyn discusses some diverging opinions of Berger versus David Sylvester on what 'Realism' constitutes in *Realism versus Realism in British Art of the 1950s* (2008).

Twentieth Century Photorealism and contemporary photorealism:

Photorealism, Hyperrealism and Superrealism were popular artistic styles of the 1960's and 1970's "in which subjects are depicted with a minute and impersonal exactitude of detail" (Chilvers "superrealism" 2004/2006) and include painting and sculpture. These artistic styles are typically spelt with capital letters when referring to them as movements. The branch of painting under Superrealism is generally called Photorealism. "The artists identified as Photorealists neither formed a coherent group nor considered themselves to be part of a movement" but "were exploring a related set of issues, methods, and subjects that led critics, curators, and art historians to both exhibit and write about their work as a coherent trend in contemporary art" (Picturing America... 2009:n.pag.). Hyperrealism and Superrealism can include subject matter painted from life but Photorealism necessarily uses photographs (mostly taken by the artists themselves) as the direct source material for paintings and so "the final product retains the look and feel of the source photograph" (Kalina 2005:130). Photorealists work mainly from photographs, and subject matter is often banal, humourless, cool and impersonal, depicting everyday people, places and objects of suburban American life (See again Fig 1).

The widespread availability of colour photography to middle class America in the 1960's and 1970's, "cameras geared towards the amateur market" and the greater affordability of photographic printing meant that not only 'significant' events were photographed, but more mundane subject matter of general interest (Picturing America 2009:n.pag.). As a reaction to the spontaneous and emotional Abstract Expressionist movement and as a development of Pop art, Photorealists sought the cool and distant objectivity and visually descriptive potential of the photograph. The glamorised public imagery of Pop art made way for more personal (and yet ironically depicted in impersonal ways), mundane and alienated views of urban suburban everyday American life; of reflective shop fronts, family cars and fast food.

"Some critics, indeed, regard it as involving a great deal of painstaking work but very little else; others think that its exponents can achieve a strange kind of intensity, the effect of the indiscriminate attention to detail being—somewhat paradoxically—to create a strong feeling of unreality" (The Oxford Dictionary of Art 1997:544, s.v. 'superrealism'). Similarly according to the Oxford Dictionary of Art, Superrealism or Photorealism are "styles in which extreme realism - in the sense of acute attention to detail - produces a markedly unrealistic overall effect" (1997:463, s.v. 'realism').

By so closely mimicking the photograph and the appearance of reality, Photorealism urges the viewer to question the nature of appearances and reality. In Platonic terms, Photorealism may be seen as four times removed from reality, as Cynthia Freeland suggests:

In Platonic idealism, art represents the third and most repugnant and redundant version of the ideal form. The first form being the divine ideal, the second form is crafted for utilitarian purpose, while the third form – the artwork – is the most useless simulacrum of the previous two. To Plato, the photograph would have been just another useless medium; a gimmick. In photorealism there is yet another step - a fourth step away from

the Platonic ideal. By reproducing a photograph in paint, one strikes a mortal blow at old Uncle Plato. (Freeland 2001:21).

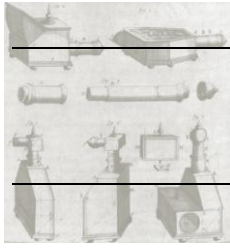
Photorealism however is not an attempt to reproduce reality, and so Freeland suggests that Plato's views have long since been outgrown (2001:21).

Contemporary photorealism, spelt with a small letter 'p', is not a movement as such, as the only condition may be that painters copy the appearance of photographs in exacting and minute detail. These artists 'span the globe' and so it is less likely that contained social and political agendas become dominant. Contemporary photorealism may have elements of naturalism, Realism, *Trompe l'oeil* and Photorealism and subject matter may be incredibly diverse. These paintings are typically painted in exacting detail copying the appearance of the photograph and thus the appearance of the physical world. Contemporary photographs are typically used and thus the subject matter painted can be seen as contemporary.

Photorealism as a movement carries with it an element of social realism, and in this way can be seen as portraits which, for Donald Kuspit, reveal the artificiality and banality of modern America as "an artificial world of perpetual youth in which everything looks neat, new and empty: a world stripped of subjective nuance, making it radically banal" (2009:n.pag.). Social realism is subtly evident in the paintings of the contemporary artists I look at: Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself. In my own work and in Van Zyl's work however, there seems to be less if no overtly social or political commentary, barring a cold, inhuman and impersonal view of public hospitals and abandoned mines. Public hospital interiors in and around Cape Town as painted by Van Zyl and myself may reveal attitudes to patients in that the buildings may function but have little concern for a patient's comfort.

This section has highlighted the fact that multiple approaches to reality are possible (and have been implemented) in painting. Photorealism is one among many, but the approaches to reality found in photorealism can be traced through most of these art movements looked at that specifically explore reality. The more radical changes in interpretations of reality such as New Realism, Impressionism and Cubism seem only to come about with the invention of the camera.

In Chapter Three and Four the exploration of reality in painting is continued, in a physical as well as a philosophical sense. This can be seen in the way in which the *camera obscura* and the photographic camera have been used by painters to create ever more realistic paintings of physical reality, as evidenced in a denotative manner within the paintings themselves. With new technology, changes are to be found in what can be painted but more interestingly entire scopic regimes are readjusted. The mechanics of vision may not significantly change but the ideas, interpretations and tools surrounding it are always in flux. The photographic vision seen in photorealistic paintings is a result of changes in visual technology and scopic regimes taking place much earlier than Photorealism in the twentieth century.



Chapter Three:

Vermeer and the *camera obscura*

The camera created a new way of seeing and opened to artists a range of pictorial imagery quite unlike that of direct experience. No study of the art of the last hundred and fifty years, and even earlier, can be made without taking into consideration the influence of the unique qualities of camera vision on artists and their patrons. (Coke 1972:1).

Photography is often seen as the catalyst of a major ideological shift in vision and its workings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Crary, however, these shifts are not initiated by devices but by changing ideas of an observing subject and so often occur long before such devices gain mainstream popularity. This chapter suggests that the introduction of camera vision, something photorealism is so dependent on, did not start with photography but perhaps much earlier with the *camera obscura* and a Dutch society primed to use it. As Crary maintains: "Modernist painting in the 1870's and 1880's and the development of photography after 1839 can be seen as later symptoms or consequences of this crucial systemic shift, which was well under way by 1890" (1992:5). Photorealism is similarly a later symptom of this 'crucial systemic shift' and so an exploration of photography alone in relation to photorealism is not adequate in laying out photorealism's connection with reality and changing notions of reality. Pinpointing the exact date of a shift in visual ideology is impossible as history is not an easy linear progression, and inevitably many ideologies may exist simultaneously in varying degrees and locations. However, clues of change already start to emerge in the use of the *camera obscura* and so it becomes useful to investigate this instrument further.

The *camera obscura* is essentially a dark box which naturally projects an image on the inside, of an opposite, outside scene through a small hole covered by a glass lens. It is commonly seen as a forerunner to photography and so was the start of some drastic changes in the way sight is mediated. The *camera obscura* and photographic camera are essentially the same kind of device. They both offer a similar way of picturing the world by projecting an array of differing shapes and colours on a flat surface, by similarly cropping and scaling objects and by influencing how vision is thought about. This is what I refer to as 'camera vision', a specific attitude to vision, and may be common both to the *camera obscura* and to photography. The *camera obscura* and photographic camera differ predominantly in the way the projected image is recorded. Photographic vision refers to the way the projected image is chemically and mechanically recorded on light sensitive paper. It focuses on the physical photograph whereas the *camera obscura* image is recorded by hand copying (tracing over the projected image).

It should be mentioned here that the *camera obscura* did not simply develop into photography and these were by no means the only two optical devices produced. An array of devices such as the stereoscope, the camera lucida, the graphic telescope, the diagraph, the agatograph, the hyalograph and magic lanterns existing alongside the *camera obscura*, with later devices

developing such as the black mirror, zoopraxiscope, phenakistoscope, kaleidoscope, praxinoscope, zoetrope, zoopraxiscope.

Many of these devices were popular and have significance in relation to photography's development but for Aaron Scharf "all of these were eclipsed by the invention of photography" (1974:23). Crary poses "the *camera obscura* as paradigmatic of the dominant status of the observer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (1992:7) and so these devices become peripheral to the focus of this study. Because the Dutch art of describing, in which the camera mode of vision was so readily used, "anticipates the visual experience produced by the nineteenth-century invention of the photograph" (Jay 1988:15), it becomes an essential focus area in relation to later photorealism.

As a precursor to photography and thus to photorealism, the focus of this chapter is on the *camera obscura* and how this device of technological mediation was used by Vermeer. A selective history of the device is mapped out, from its simple pinhole form to the more complex double lens model and the social and ideological context surrounding it is explored. As Crary maintains, it is not the objects or devices themselves but rather what they reveal about the position, status and attitude of the observing subject that is of interest (Crary 1992:3) and will be explored further. Furthermore, Crary argues that there is no real history of vision because perception does not change, rather it is the social network within which vision occurs (1992:6). This history is not only about devices but also about how they operate within society and how they animate shifting ideas of vision.³⁵ The history of technological devices used to aid painters then includes a web of social, political, scientific, artistic and philosophical histories among others. As complex systems of belief, although dominances occur, and I will be looking at only two dominant visual models in this section, there will always simultaneously be numerous counter-currents and combinations of these views present.³⁶ Using a *camera obscura* to aid in constructing a painting has particularly interesting and unusual visible results that differ to Cartesian perspective and photographic methods. I will explore how, by using this device, reality is both abstracted and made seemingly more real in a painting and by so doing affords greater emotive effect. This investigation will then form the foundation from which to compare photorealism's use of the photograph.

³⁵ As Gilles Deleuze says: "Machines are social before being technical" (in Crary 1992:31).

³⁶ For Jay "the scopic regime of modernity may be best understood as a contested terrain, rather than a harmoniously integrated complex of visual theories and practices" (1988:4). Covering a complete history of scopic regimes is not the aim of this study. Among the many variations in visual regimes, I will only be focusing on the shift from linear Cartesian perspective models of vision to the *camera obscura* model in this chapter because they relate specifically to the work of Vermeer.

Jay briefly mentions a third alternative dominant visual model apart from the Cartesian perspective and the Dutch art of describing models that will be looked at in this study. It is characterised by a painterly opacity, being "recessional, soft-focused, multiple and open" and resects the "monocular geometricalization of the Cartesian tradition" (Jay 1988:16-17). It differs to the Dutch art of describing in that it has an overt "opacity, unreadability, and . . . indecipherability of the reality it depicts" (Jay 1988:16-17). This model however has little significance in relation to my focus on camera vision and its development and so will not be examined.

3.1. Dutch seventeenthth century: shifting scopic regimes

The broader context of seventeenth century Holland reveals a culture where art plays an integral role in the emerging economy, and where vision and optics become particular interests. It is a culture ready for exploring the visual array offered by the *camera obscura*, the result of which can be seen in Vermeer's paintings.

Vermeer was born in Delft in 1632 and died in 1675 at age forty-three. He trained as a painter but also dealt in art and conducted other business. In his paintings, it can be seen that his subject matter starts with religion and classical mythology but later focuses on scenes of everyday Dutch life within the confines of a domestic setting, including some more intimate portraits. On two rare occasions his view ventures outside the confines of four walls, showing a street and city view from a window. Subject matter is predominantly focused on Dutch women engaged in various household activities. Well-dressed middle class women play and learn music, read and write letters and enjoy the company of wine and men, from time to time meeting the viewer's eye. Paintings of solitary young women and maids are characterized by their utter stillness and poise. The subject in Vermeer's paintings could equally be the way in which he so delicately renders the way light plays off surfaces, in the midst of which objects and spaces are revealed.

Few textual records of Vermeer's life exist and for an artist who left behind such a great legacy, only a meagre thirty-four to thirty-six paintings have definitively been attributed to his hand. Despite this, a renewed fascination or "rediscovery" in Vermeer's work was begun by Théophile Thoré in the mid-nineteenth century and the intrigue and wonder have not abated (Hertel 1996:1). A possible reason for this is that few other artists of the seventeenth century, it seems, so overwhelmingly embraced the *camera obscura* image and its incredible peculiarities. It was Vermeer's use of technology that has enabled him to capture a certain stillness and lifelike quality that has had the power to affect viewers for centuries. Countless authors such as Charles Seymour (1964), Joseph Pennell (in Steadman 1995), Arthur Wheelock (in Steadman 1995), Lawrence Gowing (1952 (1970)) and Svetlana Alpers (1983) support the view that Vermeer used a *camera obscura*. With evidence mounting in recent years, it becomes nearly impossible to deny this claim.³⁷ Embracing this new mode of seeing offered by the *camera obscura* not only altered perception and concepts of visual reality within painting, it signals an entire shift in the dominant scopic regime.

The seventeenth century in Holland was also known as the Golden Age or the Age of Reason, largely due to the great advancements in science, art and technology (Filipczak 2006:259). Timothy Brook (2009) attributes the beginnings of globalization, often seen as a more modern

³⁷ As mentioned earlier, a particularly interesting investigation of perspective geometry in Vermeer's paintings as well as seventeenth century documentation pertaining to the *camera obscura* is conducted by Steadman in *Vermeer's Camera* (2001). Although still not one hundred percent proven, it seems few other explanations for how Vermeer may have constructed his compositions so adequately explain the peculiarities in his work.

occurrence, to this period. Many protestant merchants from surrounding catholic areas found refuge in Northern Netherlands, bringing with them wealth and knowledge. The beginnings of a central banking system, multinational corporations (in the Dutch East India Company) and modern stock exchange were set in place. The Dutch became a leading economic force and dominated trade among surrounding countries.

It is specifically the investigation and advances of vision at this time that is of particular significance to this study. Among others the astronomer physicist mathematician Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695) and the scientist Anton van Leewenhoek, who developed the microscope, both greatly contributed to the field of optics.

Lens makers and scientists invented viewing aids that expanded sight far beyond its normal limitations, artists produced more works that take the relativity of vision into account, and natural philosophers so fundamentally reinterpreted the process by which seeing takes place that historians of science regard the new ideas as the start of modern visual theory. (Filipczac 2006:259).

Knowledge of these discoveries and ideas including detailed explanations of the use and construction of the *camera obscura* were readily available to the public due to an increase in publishing.³⁸

During the seventeenth century, northern Netherlands broke away from Catholic domination to become an independent Protestant republic (Gombrich 2006:315). This break away from a religious based ruling power also saw a decline in the demand for religious based art and commissions (Gombrich 2006:315). With an emerging economy, the wealthy Protestant merchants who rejected religious 'idolatry' became the great patrons of the arts in the Netherlands (Gombrich 2006:283).

The taste of these Protestant merchants of Holland was very different from that prevailing across the border. These men were rather comparable in their outlook to the Puritans in England: devout, hard-working, parsimonious men, most of whom dislikes the exuberant pomp of the southern manner [and so] . . . never fully accepted the full Baroque style which held sway in Catholic Europe. (Gombrich 2006:315).

Subject matter in painting saw a decisive shift as a result. Unlike the Middle ages or Renaissance, paintings were not only commissioned but also sold by the artists themselves. Artists therefore had more freedom to choose what subject matter might be sellable, but it also forced them to become active in the business of selling their paintings (Gombrich 2006:318). As competition in the market place became stiff, specialization which had already started in the sixteenth century became more pronounced, as Gombrich says: "The only chance for the minor masters to make a

³⁸ There is no direct evidence that Vermeer himself possessed a *camera obscura* or literature about it but friends of his friends are known to have been in possession of such items and so it is highly likely that Vermeer was aware of and used the *camera obscura*. This is well documented by Steadman (2001:chapter 1).

reputation lay in specializing in one particular branch or genre of painting" (2006:318-319). Simpler subject matter such as landscapes, portraits, domestic scenes and still lifes with different light reflective objects were explored, proving that "trivial objects can make a perfect picture" (Gombrich 2006:28). Gombrich particularly writes of Vermeer's paintings: "Just as there is great music without words, so there is great painting without an important subject matter" (2006:328).

They needed nothing dramatic or striking to make their pictures interesting. They simply represented a piece of the world as it appeared to them, and discovered that it could make just as satisfying a picture as any illustration of a heroic tale or comic theme. (Gombrich 2006:319).³⁹

A shift from the "seventeenth century emphasis on seeing and representation and the Renaissance emphasis on reading and interpretation" took place (Alpers 1983:xxiv). Dutch art also differed to the agendas of the paintings being made in Italy at the same time.

Since the institutionalization of art history as an academic discipline, the major analytic strategies by which we have been taught to look at and to interpret images - style as proposed by Wölfflin and iconography by Panofsky - were developed in reference to the Italian tradition. (Alpers 1983:xx).

These methods were not appropriate for Dutch art, which required a different method of analysis and looking. Seventeenth century Italian artists were concerned with narrative, iconography and distinguishing between "the real and the ideal, or between images done after life and those also shaped by judgements or by concepts in the mind" (Alpers 1983:40). This is in contrast to Dutch artists, who organised forms of representation around other sources of visual perception and were committed to an "art of describing", presenting their pictures "as describing the world seen rather than as imitations of significant human actions" (Alpers 1983:xx,xxv), and so needed to be approached differently.

This descriptive attitude among artists may be one of the reasons the *camera obscura* particularly appealed to Dutch artists who, already particularly interested in visual experience, readily used the *camera obscura* to aid their perceptually descriptive aim. As Alpers writes, Constantijn Huygens, a prominent seventeenth century Dutch figure and writer, makes this particularly clear:

Huygens binds images to sight and to seeing, specifically to new knowledge made visible by the newly trusted technology of the lens. Huygens testifies, and the society around him confirms, that images were part of a specifically visual, as contrasted with textual, culture. (1983:xxiv).

³⁹ As mentioned in Chapter Two, no painting can merely be a 'slice of life' because there is always interpretation involved. While the kind of 'simple' representation Gombrich speaks of is more complex, as I have already discussed, what is important here is the shift in subject matter that he illuminates because it indicates a shift from narrative subject matter to a more contemplative descriptive approach that is also seen in later photorealism.

This interest in vision, lenses, visual technology and simpler subject matter leads Alpers to say that the Dutch were committed to an "art of describing" (1983:xx). As will be seen in the following chapter, this can similarly be said of contemporary photorealist painters.

Cartesian perspectivalism:

The visual model that most dominantly preceded the *camera obscura* was that of Renaissance linear perspective. Cartesian perspectivalism,⁴⁰ stemming from Brunelleschi and Alberti, is often seen by writers such as William Ivans, Jr. and Richard Rorty as the reigning visual model from Alberti to the present (Jay 1988:5). This is because it "best expressed the 'natural' experience of sight valorised by the scientific world view" (Jay 1988:5).

Cartesian perspectivalism is centred on the metaphysical implications of light as divine and objective rather than perceived, combining a mathematical approach to optics as well as attributing it to God's will (Jay 1988:5-6). This system presumes a single omniscient viewer where, "Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. . . . The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God" (Berger 1972:16). This concept of space is firmly based on geometry and abstract principles meaning vision is seen as separate and controllably measurable. Constructing a scene becomes an end in itself with narrative and textual functions becoming secondary (Jay 1988:9). By locating vanishing points on a horizon line, geometric forms such as architectural structures can be accurately rendered according to laws of geometry.

In natural vision, objects further away from the viewer appear smaller. The rate at which they appear to recede can be calculated and measured and therefore drawn by using numerous construction lines. These construction lines create a kind of drawn scaffolding in order to structure objects, and appear as if objects in nature have hidden linear structure. This linear approach is often called linear perspective as opposed to atmospheric perspective, which focuses on objects appearing lighter and less saturated as they recede in distance. By establishing vanishing points, linear perspective is dependent on the position of the observer. Jay elaborates further:

The three-dimensional, rationalized space of perspectival vision could be rendered on a two-dimensional surface by following all of the transformational rules spelled out by Alberti's *De Pittura* and later treatises by Viator, Dürer, and others. The basic device was the idea of symmetrical visual pyramids or cones with one of their apexes the receding vanishing or centric point in the painting, the other the eye of the painter or the beholder. The transparent window that was the canvas, in Alberti's famous metaphor, could also be understood as a flat mirror reflecting the geometricalized space of the

⁴⁰ According to Jay, Cartesian perspective combines "Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy" (1988:4).

scene depicted back onto the no less geometricalized space radiating out from the viewing eye. (Jay 1988:6-7).⁴¹

This new approach to making pictures is a radical departure from medieval optics where there is no image formation by rays on the lens of the eye, the retina, or even the optic nerve (Snyder 1980:520). Furthermore, Alberti's system allowed the painter to depict "the rational structure of perceptual judgments" because it was believed that rather than mere appearances, perceptions were established judgments about objects (Snyder 1980:525).

Certain aspects of the Cartesian perspective model of vision in terms of a worldview remain true for the *camera obscura* model. Both are monocular, static, unblinking, seen as an eternal all-seeing eye of God, an eternal gaze (Jay 1988:7). This contrasts with later models of vision such as photography and motion picture as dynamic and moving; more of a glance than the disembodied and singular point of view of the gaze (Jay 1988:7).

However, there are many differences, as Alpers points out, between the Dutch art of describing and Cartesian perspectivalism. She compares them respectively:

attention to many small things versus a few large ones; light reflected off objects versus objects modeled by light and shadow; the surface of objects, their colors and textures, dealt with rather than their placement in a legible space; an unframed image versus one that is clearly framed; one with no clearly situated viewer compared to one with such a viewer. (Alpers 1983:44).

The implications of both these models of vision are a distancing of the viewer and the artist's emotional and bodily involvement resulting in an objective detachment (Jay 1988:8), but the *camera obscura* takes this detachment a step further.

Linear perspective is highly dependent on the position of the monocular observer. Georges Coppel maintains that "Renaissance perspective artists liked to paint a scene as a spectator (whose eyes would be at a given place; the 'viewing point' or 'viewpoint') would see it through a window whose frame would be that of the picture" (1982:270). The *camera obscura* further distances the viewer as monocular subject by showing an independent and pre-existing world "indifferent to the beholder's position in front of it" (Jay 1988:12). Whereas the Italian perspective model is as a window looking through to displayed narratives and significant actions performed by human subjects, the northern model, for Alpers, is based on *describing visual surfaces* and so if a metaphor is to be used it is more like a mirror or a map than a window (in Jay

⁴¹ Martin Kemp sums this up more explicitly: "The key feature of Albertian perspective was that it defined the appearance of things, most notably their relative size with respect to the observer, in accordance with an optical theory of vision. The apparent size of an object as registered on the surface of a picture painted according to perspective was proportional to the distance of the object from the spectator - as if seen in a 'real life' situation, given a fixed viewing position and defined location for the 'window' or 'picture frame' through which the object is seen. Move the viewer, object, or frame, and the appearance changes correspondingly according to the rule of parallax" (Kemp 2006:28).

1988:12). This signals a drastic shift in scopic regimes and allows reality to be pictured in increasingly different ways.

The *camera obscura*:

The fact that lenses and microscopes were being developed in the seventeenth century led to a reassessment of man's measure and position in the world.⁴² The effects of these devices distance the observer from the subject viewed resulting in a god-like status inferred on the viewer, but also a disorienting dislocation of fixed measures (Alpers 1983:17-18). Alpers emphasizes this by saying that in one sense man was now like a god who could see everything from the highest heavens (due to telescopes) to the tiniest creatures (due to microscopes) but he also had to reassess his place, measure, scale, proportion and the way he saw in this new world (1983:17). Vision was no longer only possible through man. "To many it seemed a devastating dislocation of the previously understood measure of the world, or, in short, of man as its measure" (Alpers 1983:17-18). This was obviously a gradual process of reassessment, but gained much momentum with the advances in visual technology in seventeenth century Holland and the application of lens use in various spheres of society.

The word 'camera' deriving from Latin literally means 'vaulted room' (Lienhard 1997:n.pag.).⁴³ The *camera obscura*, which was a term only coined in the sixteenth century by Johannes Kepler, did not just start with the introduction of lenses (Lienhard 1997:n.pag.). The pin-hole camera (essentially a *camera obscura* without a lens) was already used by the ancient Arabs to study the heavens and was a phenomenon the ancient Greeks were aware of (Coke 1972:1,3). Although the principles of the *camera obscura* had been known for centuries, it is not until the seventeenth century that the device was improved and readily used by artists as an aid for achieving greater accuracy in painting.

Many versions of the *camera obscura* were developed. In the booth-type, the artist would typically sit inside the *camera obscura* and so was able to observe the inverted image of the outside scene projected directly onto a white card or other surface. The scene is in full colour and objects are seen to move in accordance with their real world counterparts opposite the projection. This projection could be traced, allowing the artist to 'copy' scenes from the world in great detail. Being able to copy a pre-flattened out image meant the artist would not have to deal with measuring accurate proportions and having to average out the slightly differing images received by each eye, as is the case with natural vision. This arguably made the artist's task quicker and with the new emphasis on artworks as sellable commodities, this would have been a great aid to a painter.

⁴² Earlier I mentioned that it is shifts in thinking that enable new technology rather than the other way around as is mentioned here, but this is a reciprocal process. Developments in technology and shifts in thinking, as well as political and cultural conditions, are part of a complex network of cause and effect and so no one factor can be seen as the driving force.

⁴³ The first published account of the camera was written by Cesare Cesariano in his annotations to Vitruvius' *Treatise on Architecture* in 1521 (Snyder 1980:512).

In the earliest form, the camera has no lens (a pin-hole camera) and all projected objects are equally in focus but appeared somewhat dull, reversed and inverted. Gradually lenses were introduced (often attributed to Girolamo Cardano in 1550) which resulted in clearer, brighter and more saturated images, as lenses allowed a larger aperture (Snyder 1980:512; Steadman 2001:6). However, the drawback with introducing a lens was that the focal plane was significantly narrowed: "with any particular lens the resulting image was in focus at a set distance from the aperture, and only those illuminated objects at a mathematically determined distance in front of the aperture were sharply delineated in the image" (Snyder 1980:512).

Although the pictorial use of the *camera obscura* was suggested by Giovan Battista della Porta in 1558, the device was only really used by artists two centuries later (Snyder 1980:513). In the seventeenth century, the *camera obscura* becomes portable and lenses become specialised to have specific focal lengths depending on the needs of the artist (Fig 4). In this way "The mechanism of the camera was thoroughly standardized to meet specific pictorial requirements" (Snyder 1980:513). Lenses, sometimes with the addition of a second lens or a mirror placed at a 45 degree angle, could be adjustable and slide back and forth allowing the user to adjust which areas appeared in focus as well as righting the inverted and back-to-front image (Steadman 2001:16). These changes were in aid of better fitting the artist's vision of what he wanted in an image. As Snyder points out: "The problem for post-Renaissance painters was not how to make a picture that looked like the image produced by the camera, it was how to make a machine that produced an image like the ones they painted" (1980:512). It is suspected that Vermeer initially used the portable type of *camera obscura* for his early portraits (Fig 4)(Steadman 2001:33) and the booth, tent or shuttered room type fully enclosing the artist for the majority of his later works (Fig 5)(Steadman 2001:35).

The *camera obscura* was not only a device used to aid artists. It was a technical device used in many cultural activities, was a great source of entertainment and, as mentioned in Chapter Two, was a model and metaphor for the mechanics of human vision. Light travelling in straight lines from physical objects passes through the pupil and forms an inverted and back to front image of the scene on the back of the eye. It took much trial and error to improve the device but some flaws still persisted. Seventeenth century Dutch thinkers, however, were not overly concerned that as a model for vision the *camera obscura* is monocular but humans see with binocular vision. It was speculated that humans only see with one eye at a time (Crary 1988:25). Crary further elaborates on these sentiments:

The question that troubled the nineteenth century had never really been a problem before. Binocular disparity, the self-evident fact that each eye sees a slightly different image, had been a familiar phenomenon since antiquity. Only in the 1830s does it become crucial for scientists to define the seeing body as essentially binocular, to quantify precisely the angular differential of the optical axis of each eye, and to specify the physiological basis for disparity. What preoccupied researchers was this: given that an observer perceives with each eye a different image, how are they experienced as single or unitary. Before 1800, even when the question was asked it was more as a curiosity, never a central problem. Two alternative explanations had been offered for centuries: one proposed that we never saw anything except with one eye at a time; the

other was a projection theory articulated by Kepler, and proposed as late as the 1750s, which asserted that each eye projects an object to its actual location. (Crary 1988:25).

This binocular disparity was much later addressed by devices such as the stereoscope which presents each eye with two slightly different images and so creates an illusion of depth (Crary 1992:120).

Other flaws, or ways in which camera vision is quite different to natural human vision, are evident in Vermeer's work. These however seem so minor that it is quite plausible to think of the *camera obscura* as an exact model for human vision. Metaphorically, in the seventeenth century camera vision almost seems to be a more perfect model than natural human vision: "The orderly and calculable penetration of light rays through the single opening of the camera corresponds to the flooding of the mind by the light of reason, not the potentially dangerous dazzlement of the senses by the sun" (Crary 1992:45). For this reason, "The *camera obscura*, with its monocular perspective, became a more perfect terminus for a cone of vision, a more perfect incarnation of a single point than the awkward binocular body of the human subject" (Crary 1992:53).

Vision here is rational, measurable, orderly and controlled and reveals a particular ideological attitude. Crary says: "it must be stressed that the *camera obscura* defines the position of an interiorized observer to an exterior world, not just to a two-dimensional representation, as is the case with perspective" (1992:34). Housed inside the *camera obscura*, the observing subject is isolated and separated from the external world. A clear distinction is made between exterior and interior, between subject and object and vision is rendered essentially passive and transparent (Phillips 1993:130). From this point of view, vision may have seemed like an objective process and the viewer could objectively view the scene presented before them. This idea can clearly be seen in Steadman's illustration of a possible arrangement for Vermeer's *camera obscura* (Fig 5) where the artist is entirely isolated from the external scene.

Camera obscuras were seen as both objective and subjective, as transparent recorders of the outside world. Crary maintains:

On the one hand the observer is disjunct from the pure operation of the device and is there as a disembodied witness to a mechanical and transcendental re-presentation of the objectivity of the world. On the other hand, however, his or her presence in the camera implies a spatial and temporal simultaneity of human subjectivity and objective apparatus. (Crary 1992:41).

This seventeenth century context then shows a culture very ready to embrace camera vision. For Crary (1992), a change is seen in the mind-set of the observing subject. However, a change is also seen in the paintings produced by this new observer. It is this change, accompanied by technological shifts, that facilitated the particular type of vision that is of interest in Vermeer's paintings.

3.2. Looking at Vermeer's paintings

'This wedge of light': Tonal accuracy vs. linear accuracy:

A closer inspection of how linear perspective and *camera obscuras* were used further reveals important shifts in how vision was approached in new ways, resulting in changing scopic regimes. In comparing certain paintings by Pieter de Hooch and Vermeer, the subject matter and manner of painting seem similar enough but closer inspection reveals some key differences in how they were constructed. Steadman notices how in Vermeer's paintings the tile patterns always line up, even joining up correctly behind obstructions: "It never happens that incompatible parts of a pattern are found in discrete parts of the floor" (2001:80). This is clearly seen in Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith* (Fig 6). Even reflective spheres within paintings such as *Allegory of Faith*, when analysed mathematically, conform meticulously to accurate perspective by reflecting the lighting conditions of the surrounding room in exacting detail (Steadman 2001:107-108). This differs to De Hooch's *A Woman Drinking with Two Men* (Fig 7) where an impossible row of tiles has been included in the foreground but does not match up to the back wall (Fig 8) (Steadman 2001:83). Similar incongruencies occur in the floor detail between the legs of two figures in De Hooch's *Soldier Paying a Hostess* (Fig 9 & 10) (Steadman 2001:83). The perspective accuracy in Vermeer's paintings is uncanny.⁴⁴ Accurate spherical reflections seem impossible to work out mathematically according to perspective rules whereas De Hooch's miss-matched tiles seem like a clumsy mistake. These observations reveal an important difference between linear perspective construction and tracing an image from a *camera obscura* projection.

Linear perspective can be seen as a mathematically constructed order of a hidden and uniform structure to the world. Martin Jay maintains that: "This new concept of space was geometrically isotropic, rectilinear, abstract, and uniform" (1988:6). This highly analytical approach is evident in a drawing by Jan Vredeman de Vries (Fig 11), illustrating methods of perspective construction. Furthermore, the perspective construction method is incredibly time consuming and smaller intricacies, such as spherical reflections and tiles between obstacles, are often painfully hard to get right. For this reason, Steadman believes De Hooch used perspective construction (Steadman 2001:83). The perspective attitude further reveals an approach to how form is represented. Its analytical and measurable nature often results in objects being clearly defined and even outlined in order to convey the entirety of their form.

Using the *camera obscura* to trace a scene is vastly a different process to linear perspectival construction. The *camera obscura* masks these perspective lines by offering an already perfect perspectival image as it is shaped as a flat patchwork of shapes in various tone and colour.

⁴⁴ Steadman does however point out that on the odd occasion Vermeer seems to have taken some deliberate artistic liberties. The naturalistic looking oblique view of the landscape scenes on the lids of the virginals in *Lady Standing at the Virginals* and *Lady Seated at the Virginals*, when straightened out become badly distorted (Steadman 2001:115-117). In contrast with the incredible accuracy of spherical reflections as mentioned, these 'liberties' only seem to support the view that Vermeer used the *camera obscura* to construct his paintings in general.

Perfect accuracy of the reflections in spheres seem much more attainable when an artist simply needs to trace the exact shapes as he sees them already flattened out.

Where linear perspective may have been focused on defining form clearly, by using the *camera obscura*, Vermeer was able to record tone, contour and colour in more accurate ways even if this did result in unusual and abstracted forms. "Accuracy of tone and contour, rather than methodic accumulation of descriptive elements and their minute description, sustain the illusion of reality" (Janson 2001-9: n.pag.). Similarly, Steadman says: "Vermeer starts to paint patches of light and colour, not fingers or bodices or violas with the forms and outlines by which they are mentally conceived" (2001:159). This differing approach to reality offered by the *camera obscura* allowed for a new kind of accuracy that gave a greater illusion of 'reality' while seemingly to also abstract forms.

This can clearly be seen in the detail image of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (Fig 12 & 13), where the viewer is given a clear impression of thread and bobbins but upon closer inspection they appear as entirely abstract blobs and squiggles of paint. Similarly, in the detail image of Vermeer's *The Guitar Player* (Fig 14 & 15), the apparent abstracted and simplified shapes of the jacket seem not to conform to the actual tuck and fold of the fabric yet appear to conform tonally. Even though some of the forms appear startlingly abstract on closer inspection, an "absolute visual authenticity is obtained" (Janson 2001-9: n.pag.). The photographic quality so often ascribed to Vermeer's work is then not found in painstaking detail or general perspective accuracy but rather in accurately recording light and tone, "true to the view through half-closed-eyes as it were, *not* always true to detail" (emphasis in original)(Steadman 2001:159).

However, this leads to the question of what accuracy to tone may mean. Vermeer certainly may have recorded tone as he saw it through the *camera obscura* but this does not mean artists painting from life did not equally accurately record tone as they saw it.

The *camera obscura* does not see as humans do. Human vision works by constantly readjusting the lens of the eye as well as the size of the pupil opening as the eye moves and scans a scene over time. This means that dark areas and light areas within a certain range can be given a greater or lesser 'exposure' by adjusting how much light enters the eye. Similarly, provided a viewer is not short or far-sighted, near and far objects all appear in focus as each object is literally focused on in order to see it. A viewer can similarly focus on parts in a painting that are painted to appear unfocussed. Although a human subject can consciously blur vision by squinting and so forth, this activity is not sustainable. The human eye can constantly re-focus on individual areas and accommodate for different light intensities within the same three-dimensional scene. It becomes hard *not* to adjust to changing lighting conditions within one scene. Thus, detail in an observed three-dimensional scene can equally be seen in dark and light areas and perhaps less contrast is perceived due to this adjusting. This natural way of viewing scenes, composed piecemeal of multiple fused parts over time is barely noticed as a conscious action by the viewing subject and it is perhaps only due to the flaws of camera vision that viewers become aware of

these mechanisms.⁴⁵ In painting from life therefore, high contrast may not be perceived due to this individual readjustment of each part.

The *camera obscura* on the other hand cannot easily select individual parts of a scene and adjust tone accordingly. Thus when viewing a *camera obscura* image more contrast may be evident in the image than would have been seen in observing the scene directly. Vermeer is often praised for his astute use of contrast and his unusual practise of including dark objects in the foreground as is seen in *The Lace Maker* (Fig 12), *The Girl with the Red Hat* (Fig 16) *The Art of Painting* (Fig 17). This may be a result of the way in which a *camera obscura* image can be viewed in terms of tone as flat patches of areas of greater or lesser contrast as opposed to constructed, defined and outlined objects.

This seems to be a fundamentally different approach to composition and continues today in photorealistic paintings. Vermeer may have constantly moved back and forth between *camera obscura* and the staged scene adjusting not objects, but tone, adding more light here, a deep shadow there until the composition looked 'just right'. Although this is speculative, other theorists have had similar thoughts. By focusing on shadows, Gowing notices a complete lack of line in Vermeer's paintings, which he says shows an "almost solitary indifference to the whole linear convention and its historic function of describing, enclosing, embracing the form its limits" (in Steadman 2001:42). For Steadman: "The camera collapses three dimensional space onto the two-dimensional plane" (2001:157).

Solid objects become flat shapes, and their forms are comprehensible only by their outlines, their tonal modulation, and the shapes and position of their shadows. The spaces that separate objects are also turned into flat shapes. All these shapes can then be studied in compositional terms, and can be manipulated by moving the objects themselves. (emphasis in original)(Steadman 2001:157).

He may have also needed to actively control how much light was allowed to enter the aperture for maximum clarity. Steadman (2001) has investigated this preoccupation with tone in Vermeer's paintings further. Recent x-rays taken of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Fig 18) reveal a remarkably tonal approach to under-painting (Steadman 2001:43). Steadman notes that for the first layer of paint over the light coloured ground: "The paint has been applied, it appears, in solid areas, corresponding to parts of the optical image where the brightness was below a certain threshold. The result is something like that produced in photography by using high-contrast paper" (2001:43). "No other artist's method reveals this immediate and perfect

⁴⁵ Today an attempt to rectify these flaws is taking place in high dynamic range photography. This is a process where multiple and successive images with differing exposures of the same scene are taken and then selectively overlaid and edited to choose areas with the greatest clarity and detail. In theory, these images should be more true to natural human vision but the results, however, seem somewhat strange. One reason for this may just be that standard photography (without a high dynamic range) has become so familiar, culturally ingrained and accepted as 'true' to life that alternatives seem jarring. Perhaps high dynamic images will soon become a new dominant model.

objectivity: the radiography of painting has indeed never shown a form in itself as wonderful as this strange impersonal shape" (Gowing in Steadman 1995:355-356).

The description is always exactly adequate, always completely and effortlessly in terms of light. Vermeer seems almost not to care, or to not even know, what it is that he is painting. What do men call this wedge of light? A nose? A finger? What do we know of its shape? To Vermeer none of this matters, the conceptual world of names and knowledge is forgotten, nothing concerns him but what is visible, the tone, the wedge of light. (Gowing 1952:23).

The initial painting seems to have been masked out from a tonal projection but details may have been observed from life and adjusted accordingly. The camera will only do some of the painter's work. It will only offer its image. It is up to the painter to adjust the scene and to meticulously record, translate and choose how and what of the projected image gets used. The artist still has the task of carefully mixing and applying colours and struggling with how to make tones convincingly blend and meet, something that Vermeer carefully mastered.

By attending so closely to the tonal accuracy seen in the *camera obscura* projection rather than the more traditional focus on linear accuracy, Vermeer is able to achieve a more convincing depiction of reality even though closer inspection reveals unusual distortions. Ironically, it is by abstracting form that Vermeer creates a more convincing illusion.

Peripheries and soft focus:

As unusual as it was to see form in terms of tone and shapes of light, a stranger phenomenon was equally evident. The *camera obscura* allowed artists to clearly see visual phenomena known to be present in the human eye that are impossible to see naturally. A human ordinarily only sees the central area of their visual field in clear focus. The peripheral areas of the human 'cone of vision' detects movement and light well but little else. It is impossible to naturally see peripheral areas in clear focus and to study them at length. This inclusion then reveals hidden parts of human vision, "biologically inaccessible to unaided eyes" (Filipczak 2006:259). The *camera obscura* however reveals these peripheries and Vermeer startlingly included them in his paintings. "With his sight thus artificially expanded he could examine the appearance of objects while they stayed unfocussed. Furthermore, he could compare [and choose] how that appearance changed as he adjusted the focus" (Filipczak 2006:261).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Linear perspective may have also done this to a degree by constructing the peripheral areas outside of natural human vision. The further outside the field of vision, the more objects appear distorted and so this practice seems to have been discouraged. Including peripheries according to linear perspective in this case becomes a theoretical and mathematical exercise focusing on the forms of objects but not on how light and colour are equally distorted. This differs greatly to seeing tangible evidence of these exact distortions in full colour and exacting detail as projected by the *camera obscura*.

It has been well documented by Steadman (2001), Seymour (in Steadman 2001) and others that the blurred spots known as 'disks of confusion' and 'halation' are light distortions caused by the *camera obscura*. Filipczak points out that "Vermeer did not need this viewing aid to see forms distinctly, but it was biologically impossible for him to study the appearance of unfocussed forms without a lens that could be adjusted, the type of lens that formed part of the improved type of *camera obscura*" (2006:261). Images of lion-headed chair ends similar to those painted by Vermeer in *Girl with the Red Hat* (Fig 16) and recorded by modern *camera obscuras* clearly reveal these blurred spots and compares remarkably closely to the same blurred spots seen in Vermeer's paintings (Fig 19).

Much debate exists about what effect these blurred and distorted areas in Vermeer's paintings have. These areas depart from natural human vision becoming abstract and unnatural but also draw the viewer gaze to stay focused on the central part of the image. Blurred edges may draw the viewer in to focus on centre without overtly being aware of this happening, but may also draw the viewer to the unusual abstracted shapes of the blurs and to the surface of the painting.

Apart from the peripheries, the central areas in a *camera obscura* projection cannot appear in equal focus at the same time. Adjustments may be made to a *camera obscura* allowing the artist to adjust the focus for areas separately but often Vermeer would paint the unfocussed planes in either due to choice or the limits of his particular model of *camera obscura*.

Curiously, these blurred areas sometimes coincide with the main protagonist of the scene as seen in Vermeer's *The Girl with the Red Hat* (Fig 16) where the girl's features are hazy and hard to make out. Similarly in *Woman Holding a Balance* (Fig 20), Jorgen Wadum notes that "walls, with their flaking plaster and nail-holes, were rarely seen in other seventeenth-century paintings with bourgeois interiors" (in Filipczak 2006:261). In this case, the back wall appears in remarkable focus, revealing each mark and nail, but the girl is less defined. It can only be speculated that this was something Vermeer consciously played with in his compositions, enjoying the blurred effect. The 'main focus' of this painting can then mean two things: in terms of actual focal clarity it is the back wall, but in subject matter is the girl. This ambiguity sets up a strange tension in Vermeer's work even if it is not overtly evident to the viewer and is something evident in later photorealist paintings.

This differs from Vermeer's contemporaries' use of soft focus. "When other artists used selective blurring, they did so to designate objects as distant or insufficiently lit, or as having a subordinate role in the scene. As a result, blurring occurs in the backgrounds rather than foregrounds, and with the supporting cast rather than the leading figures" (Filipczak 2006:226). Thus, Vermeer leaves the viewer in an awkward position viewing the main subject as peripheral and some seemingly insignificant background as focal. Filipczak spells out the resulting effect: "In the presence of such conflicting visual signals an observer feels simultaneously drawn to the woman and kept at a distance" (2006:268). "The unprecedented disjunction between an optical and a conceptual focus constitutes part of the appeal of Vermeer's work in modern times" (Filipczak 2006:272).

A slice of life:

Another important aspect of Vermeer's *camera obscura* use is in the way it seems to offer a 'slice of life' in a similar way to photography and photorealism. Although Vermeer's compositions are still largely staged, *camera obscura* use alters the way in which compositions are chosen and objects are cropped. Alpers contrasts the way Albertian linear perspective constructs space within a defined framed window, with a particularly unbounded feeling of the surface of seventeenth century Dutch paintings:

The Dutch paintings seem more naturally to imitate natural vision: An imitative picture, it is assumed, is perspectival and Italian by definition and the Dutch add nature to it. Images made by the *camera obscura* and the photograph have frequently been invoked as analogues to this direct, natural vision. . . . the image spread out on the pictorial surface appears to be an unbounded fragment of the world that continues beyond the canvas . . . the world staining the surface with color and light, impressing itself upon it; the viewer, neither located nor characterized, perceiving all with an attentive eye but leaving no trace of his presence. . . . to frame such a fragment, . . . would be a decisive act. (Alpers 1983:27).

This 'unbounded' feeling comes across in Vermeer's *The Guitar Player* (Fig 14) in the unusual way the girl's right arm is cropped and the way in which she gazes off to her right, suggesting a world beyond the picture frame. Framing devices within Vermeer's compositions, such as heavy curtains as seen in *The Art of Painting* (Fig 17) and *Allegory of Faith* (Fig 6), suggest a self-consciously staged environment that appears to be at odds with the naturalistic vision Alpers attributes to Dutch painting. Apart from creating a certain visual harmony, this may have a further function; to control the amount of light emitted on the scene and supposedly through the aperture of the *camera obscura*. It also illustrates the physical and psychological separation from the observed scene caused by the use of a *camera obscura*. In this way there seems to be a tension created between the active staging of a scene and the recording of a seemingly unbounded fragment.

The *camera obscura* was not merely an objective tool, but imposed many restrictions on an artist. The type of *camera obscura* and size of room available to Vermeer would have altered his artistic decisions. Choosing a position for the *camera obscura* where the image projected on the back wall appeared clearest may have resulted in a relatively small projection. Since the *camera obscura* projects a circular image, choosing a square format as opposed to a more rectangular shape would allow an artist to use the maximum of the focussed area possible. Steadman notices this and points out that Vermeer not only painted almost of his paintings on almost square formats, but the sizes of nearly all his paintings correspond with an area on the opposite wall of the room he painted in exactly within the confines of the circular projected image via a *camera obscura* (2001:102-130).

Through mathematically analysing Vermeer's paintings and three dimensional scale models of some of his paintings, Steadman (2001) is able to calculate the exact proportions of almost the entire room or rooms Vermeer painted in. With this evidence and by following perspective lines

in Vermeer's paintings he is able to calculate exactly where the aperture of the *camera obscura* may have been (2001:102-104). Incredibly, in all the paintings studied by Steadman, the apertures fall roughly in the same positions (2001:102-104). In so doing he is also able to calculate exactly where and at what exact size each projection will fall on the back wall (Steadman 2001:102-104). His findings are that Vermeer's paintings correspond almost exactly to the scale of the projected image and so it is highly likely that the projection on the back wall was traced (2001:102-104). By using the image as projected on the back wall, it also meant all Vermeer's compositions were frontally viewed. "This would be a direct consequence of using a booth-type camera in which the back wall of the room acted as a projection screen. The picture plane would then be necessarily parallel with the far wall of the room" (See again Fig 5)(Steadman 2001:162).

This means that the *camera obscura* almost certainly altered and restricted the artist's choice in scale and format. Unusual round paintings such as Johannes Torrentius' *Emblematic still life with flagon, glass, jug and bridle* (Fig 21) also emerge in the seventeenth century and may have been inspired by the circular form of the entirety of the *camera obscura* projection.^{47 48} The *camera obscura* imposed certain restrictions on the artist but it also inspired new ways of recording, presenting and painting the world.

To trace and work from a *camera obscura* image is quite different to taking and using printed photographs. The *camera obscura* image is projected and it moves over time, which is different to the instantaneous action of freezing and recording a single moment in photography. Vermeer's choice of subject matter would have had to be very still if he was to trace the *camera obscura* image and he thus includes none of the pets or children so common in other Dutch paintings (Steadman 2001:162-163). Steadman notes how being projected or backlit gives it a "brilliance and animation - despite its dimness in absolute terms - which printed photographs lack" and local colour is condensed and concentrated and "shadows are made relatively darker, contrast seems stronger" (2001:162). Indeed, Vermeer's lighting comes across as intense and vivid, as seen in *The Girl with the Red Hat* (Fig 16), and this is probably due to the differences in *camera obscura* vision.

Harris, in his interpretation of Alpers (1983), notices that the image produced by the camera in the seventeenth century was the closest working model to Kepler's idea of the mechanics of vision (2001:182). In copying these images then, rather than "'direct confrontation with nature' - which is in one sense how they appear - they are, in fact, painted representations of *other images* made mechanically in emulation of the retinal image: based on lenses, *camera obscuras*, eye-glasses, and microscopes" (Harris 2001:182-183). Harris attributes the odd stillness sensed in

⁴⁷ This was at least suspected by his contemporaries and is further implied by the fact that Torrentius himself confessed to being incapable of painting human beings and yet painted still lives in perfect detail and proportion (Steadman 2001:19-20).

⁴⁸ In standard modern photographic and digital cameras the format is usually pre-set at a rectangular average. In photographing my own subject matter this format affects how and what I choose to include and exclude within a scene, but this will be looked at more closely in the following chapter.

Dutch paintings to the way they actually simulate the retinal image itself (Harris 2001:183). In this way he says "Dutch paintings are, then, more like 1960's and 1970's 'hyper-realist' pictures produced by painting meticulously over colour photographs projected onto canvas, than they are like any art produced in Italy in the period since the Renaissance" (Harris 2001:183).

These elements combine to create the stillness and intensity so characteristic of Vermeer's paintings. Steadman observes: "There is no speech in Vermeer's pictures. People communicate by letter, or through music. It has become a commonplace to speak of the stillness and detachment of Vermeer's interiors" (2001:164). As Charles de Tolnay so eloquently states:

Vermeer's paintings can no doubt be defined as the most perfect still lifes of European art - still lifes in the original sense of the word, that is to say 'silent life', *Still Leben*, dream of perfect reality, where the calmness surrounding things and beings almost becomes a substance, where the objects and the figures (treated as objects) give us to understand the secret relationship between them. Time here appears to be suspended, daily life takes on the guise of eternity. (emphasis in original)(in Steadman 2001:164).

"His paintings are really still lifes with human beings" (Gombrich 2006:329). This stillness seems to be one of the reasons Vermeer's paintings, and the paintings that will be looked at in the next chapter, are so intriguing.

From the aforementioned arguments, it can be seen that the *camera obscura* has a profound impact on new possibilities explored in painting. It "allowed the artist to enter a newly revealed world of optical phenomena", it affected focus, contrast, subject matter, cropping, lighting decisions, scale and proportion in the image and of the physical painting itself (Steadman 2001). A fundamental shift from seeing in terms of line and defined objects to tone and shape emerges, resulting in new ways of seeing and painting.

It is the way in which Vermeer achieves complete and painstaking precision in the rendering of textures, colours and forms without the picture ever looking laboured or harsh. Like a photographer who deliberately softens the strong contrasts of the picture without blurring the forms, Vermeer mellowed the outlines and yet retained the effect of solidity and firmness. It is this strange and unique combination of mellowness and precision which makes his best paintings so unforgettable. (Gombrich 2006:329).

The camera alone cannot make the painting and it is in the way Vermeer has used and manipulated the tools at his disposal that he has managed to create such a unique vision and new way of seeing. With some interesting differences, camera vision, which I believe started emerging in Dutch seventeenth century painting, persists today.

In summary, the shift from a linear perspective to a *camera obscura* model of vision is not only a change in painted appearances but in entire attitudes to vision. The seventeenth century Dutch culture, as Alpers argues, had a particularly descriptive as opposed to narrative attitude to painting and subject matter (1983:xx). This meant that camera vision offered by the *camera obscura* may have been an appealing choice for Dutch artists at the time to aid them in their descriptive endeavours. As a device used to mediate reality, the *camera obscura* created a

radically new way of picturing space. As discussed, these new approaches include a focus on tonal accuracy and seeing in patches of light rather than accuracy to defining form via outlines. The viewer is separated from what is viewed and observes unfocused and peripheral areas. Although Vermeer's subject matter is largely staged, the way some forms are cropped seems to hint at the unbounded fragmentary view so characteristic of later photography. Because these new ways of looking, impossible to achieve without the use of a *camera obscura*, are evident in Vermeer's paintings, contemporary Vermeer scholars such as Alpers (1983) and Steadman (1995) believe he must have used a *camera obscura*.

The *camera obscura* may have become the dominant scopic regime and model for vision in seventeenth century Holland but it does not seem to have become the *modus operandi* apparatus for artists. The device still had many drawbacks and it seems that few artists managed to overcome these. Some obstacles include obtaining the appropriate focal length of the *camera obscura* lens, controlling the light balance of the scene so that the projected image appeared neither too bright nor too dull, dealing with visual distortions, halation, light spots and correcting the inverted and back-to-front projection.

A further challenge was that to use the projected image as a reference to paint from after it was traced meant the artist would have to illuminate the painting while keeping the *camera obscura* projection unlit. Additionally, seventeenth century *camera obscuras* had limited projection sizes. As Vermeer is suspected to have traced the *camera obscura* projections, the size of his paintings were thus restricted (Steadman 2001:102-130). In painting from life, positions of subject matter and corresponding lighting conditions can be approximated. In the *camera obscura*, subject matter and lighting has to remain still and constant in order to be traced. Still objects and posed sitters arranged in a contained room with constant lighting from one direction would be suitable, but inevitably restricting to a wider variety of subject matter, location and scale. It is not until the development of photography in the early to mid eighteenth hundreds that camera vision becomes easily accessible and user friendly to artists.

3.3. Beyond the *camera obscura*

Many of the changes from linear perspective models of vision to the distinct camera vision produced by the *camera obscura* are evident in contemporary photorealist paintings today. This however is not a seamless shift from one mode of vision to another. Although the mechanics remained relatively constant, the meaning of the *camera obscura* fluctuated. What was an apparatus of truth initially, becomes an obscurer, concealer and mystifier of truth a century later (Crary 1992:29). In the mid-eighteenth century, M.G.J. Gravesande warns of the *camera obscura*'s distortions:

too exact an imitation would be a distortion; because the way in which we see natural objects in a *camera obscura* is different from the way in which we see them naturally. This glass interposed between objects and their representation on the paper intercepts the rays of the reflected light which render shadows visible and pleasantly coloured, thus shadows are rendered darker by it than they would be naturally. Local colour of objects

being condensed in a smaller space and losing little of their strength seem stronger and brighter in colour. The effect is indeed heightened but it is false. (in Scharf 1974:21).

The photograph may seem similar to previous types of images such as those produced by the *camera obscura* but Crary sees it as vastly different (1992:14). Photography creates an entirely new commodity economy of value and exchange and reshapes "an entire territory on which signs and images, each effectively severed from a referent, circulate and proliferate" (Crary 1992:14). In the nineteenth century, vision and the observer move away from stable and fixed positions, becoming increasingly abstract, deferred and dislocated with the earlier separation of interior and exterior being dissolved.

What takes place from around 1810 to 1840 is an uprooting of vision from the stable and fixed relations incarnated in the *camera obscura*. If the *camera obscura*, as a concept, subsisted as an objective ground of visual truth, a variety of discourses and practices - in philosophy, science, and in procedures of social normalization - tend to abolish the foundations of that ground in the early nineteenth century. In a sense, what occurs is a new valuation of visual experience: it is given an unprecedented mobility and exchangeability, abstracted from any founding site or referent. (Crary 1992:14).

This sentiment can clearly be seen in Charles Chevalier's writings of 1829:

the camera bore many imperfections as it came from the hand of its inventor; the numerous modifications it had undergone [until recently] had only slightly improved its design; and painters, mindful of their reputations, had ceased to use it because it presented badly defined images, with confused outlines. Moreover, these images had a total crudeness which became a characteristic of the works of artists who used the instrument too frequently (in Snyder 1980:513).

Truth to natural appearances is questioned when what is natural is seen and recorded in unnatural ways. The tension between perceived reality, known reality and mediated reality as produced by the artist using a *camera obscura*, forces the viewer to reassess their relationship to the real. Classical optics and the science of perspective that visual models were based on became obsolete with the discovery that light travels in waves and not straight lines as previously thought (Crary 1992:86). Crary maintains that:

All the models of representation derived from the Renaissance and later models of perspective no longer had the legitimization of a science of optics. The verisimilitude associated with perspectival construction obviously persisted into the nineteenth century, but it was severed from the scientific base that had once authorized it and it could no longer have the same meanings it had when either Aristotelian or Newtonian optics held sway. (Crary 1992:86).

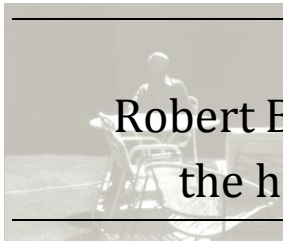
For Crary, the *camera obscura* does not simply evolve and develop into photography and cinema. Early on in *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1991) he resists the standard linear progression of vision with Renaissance linear perspective and the *camera obscura* of the seventeenth century developing into photography and cinema. He

maintains that these are vastly different, "belonging to two fundamentally different organisations of representation and the observer, as well as of the observer's relation to the visible" (1992:32).

However, Phillips points out that later on in his book Crary contradicts himself. Crary tells us "it would be completely misleading to pose the *camera obscura* as an early stage in an ongoing autonomization and specialization of vision that continues into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (1992:57). But he later on posits photography as the *camera obscura's* successor, and according to Phillips in so doing he "reinstalls such a narrative by reminding us that photography did in fact maintain 'older "naturalistic" pictorial codes' - or at least the belief in them which in this context amounts to the same thing" (Phillips 1993:135).

Perhaps rather than an either/or approach, it can be said that photography was both a development of and a departure from the *camera obscura* model of vision. Jay warns against any attempt to create a 'true' vision and to demonise older scopic regimes: "Rather than erect another hierarchy, it may therefore be more useful to acknowledge the plurality of scopic regimes now available to us" and to "revel in the possibilities opened up by the scopic regimes we have already invented and the ones, now so hard to envision, that are doubtless to come" (1988:20).

In the first part of the following chapter, the similarities and departures between *camera obscura* vision and photographic vision will be investigated. It will be shown that although images produced by the *camera obscura* and photography have similarities the use of the photograph by painters has differing consequences both within the painting and for the broader social networks surrounding it.



Chapter Four:

Robert Bechtle, Adriaan van Zyl and Gina Heyer: the hidden camera and emotive response

4.1. Photography and changing scopic regimes

The emergence of photography as a widespread technology has broader implications than just a change in the visible appearance of an image. It has shifted an entire scopic regime as cultural perception and social understandings of photography have changed along with its technological developments (Kriebel 2007:5). The changes in painting facilitated by the *camera obscura* are part of a broader network of changing cultural, philosophical and ideological concerns, which drive changes in painting's subject matter, technique, methods and materials. Similarly, photorealistic painting is influenced not only by technical developments in photography, but also by the changes in thinking about images that accompanied these developments. It is thus useful to briefly explore the broader context and history of photography in order to better understand its impact on photorealistic painting.

This analysis may also aid in understanding why Crary believes painting seems to be facing its most challenging identity crisis yet (1990:1). Crary maintains that we live "in the midst of a transformation in the nature of visibility probably more profound than the break that separates medieval imagery from Renaissance perspective" (1990:1). He attributes this transformation largely to developments in visual imaging technology:

The rapid development in little more than a decade of a vast array of computer graphics techniques is part of a sweeping reconfiguration of relations between an observing subject and modes of representation that effectively nullifies most of the culturally established meanings of the terms *observer* and *representation*. (emphasis in original)(Crary 1990:1).

The photographic image (of which computer graphics is an extension) has filtered into every aspect of contemporary life, forever changing the visual landscape and causing diverse reactions. Photorealism is only one of these multiple reactions, but in directly dealing with and assimilating this new technology, it renegotiates the real and the photographed in relevant and interesting ways. It becomes an important part of how contemporary western artists have reacted to photographic technology but at the same time, photorealism finds itself in a philosophically awkward position as situated somewhere between photographic and painting discourses.

A seamless explanation of the role of photography in painting and in contemporary life may not be possible, but a selection of diverse views is offered here as part of an on-going discussion. These views include: Gombrich's (1960) discussions about how painting can never copy reality; Berger's (1972) importance of the artist stilling the photographic image; the impact of Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of animal locomotion in artist's depictions of perceived reality (in Leslie

2001); Elkins' (2001; 2005) views on how painting functioned before and after the advent of photography and mass reproduction; Walter Benjamin's (1999) 'loss of aura' resulting from the mass reproduction of images; Marshal McLuhan's (in Freeland 2001) ideas of digital imagery being liberating and criticism of this by Freeland (2001), among others. These specific theorists have been selected for their relevance to discussions around the construction and mediation of reality in paintings and through photography.

The introduction of photography:

The *camera obscura* and photographic camera are arguably similar devices in the way they receive an image from the external world. Although the artist, photographer, or camera operator can manually manipulate a scene and adjust the camera device, the way that each projected image is *recorded* is fundamentally different. The *camera obscura* went through numerous developments to improve its functioning, but the breakthrough in being able to chemically and mechanically rather than manually record images was the beginning of photography. The photograph's ability to so easily record, transform, and distance the viewer from the observed scene, to easily be multiplied and to allow the general public access to taking and making pictures, had major implications on photorealism's special ability to create visions of the real.

Photography developed almost simultaneously in France and England towards the late 1830's. According to Badger, the daguerrotype, developed by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in France:

employed a polished, silver-coated copper plate exposed in the dark to iodine to create a coating of light-sensitive silver iodine. When the plate had been exposed to light in the camera, the latent image was 'developed' by mercury vapour and 'fixed' by a warm solution of common salt. (Badger 2007:15).

The resultant image, although beautifully detailed, appeared laterally reversed and was not reproducible (Badger 2007:15).

The calotype, developed in England by William Henry Fox Talbot, eventually superseded the daguerrotype because it made use of a negative and was thus multipliable (Badger 2007:15-16). The calotype was made by exposing light-sensitized paper placed in a camera, which when developed and fixed, produced a tonally reversed image, the 'negative' (Badger 2007:15). By placing the negative into contact with another sheet of light-sensitized paper and exposing light through it, a 'positive' and thus tonally correct image could be produced (Badger 2007:15). The convenience of this method far outweighed its minor flaws in visible paper fibres and hazy edges caused by the transfer method. The fact that for the first time an image so detailed and true to the appearance of things was so easily multipliable drastically changed the mobility and accessibility of the image. Badger prophetically claims that: "The paper negative, blessed with the priceless capacity to generate endless reproductions, was to form the basis of all modern photography until the advent of the digital camera" (2007:16).

Additional developments occurred. In 1851 Frederick Scott Archer further refined the photographic process by introducing the glass negative process, producing cheaper, reproducible and higher quality images, but the main photographic principles had been set in place (Badger

2007:19). Cameras and photographic processes are constantly changing but Anne McCauley points out one overriding common ground:

A photograph does not have to be a multiple, it does not have to be on paper, it does not have to be flat, it does not have to be made with a camera, it does not inherently need to be fixed or permanent (although that is nice if you want anyone else to ever see it), it does not have to be iconic (or 'resemble' the image formed by the projection of light through a lens onto the retina): it has to be generated by light. . . . [and] the action of light must result in a change in physical substance that is visible to the eye. (emphasis in original)(2007:411).

At the outset, photography may seem to be a unified field of study but as McCauley admits, even simply defining the photograph as in the attempt above, proves difficult. Spanning from the 1830's up to the present, photography includes "daguerrotypes, calotypes, 35-millimeter prints, Polaroids and digital photographs" (Kriebel 2007:3,6). Some photographs have negatives, some are endlessly reproducible and some, such as the Polaroid, are not (Kriebel 2007:4). For Sabine Kriebel, definitions of photography are also about more than photographs (2007:3). Photography thus includes an array of objects; the photograph, but also the "photographic *practice*, which would incorporate the psychologically and ideologically informed act of taking photographs and the process of developing, reproducing, and circulating them in society" as well as "the photograph's role in discourse" (emphasis in original)(Kriebel 2007:5).

Changes and reactions:

The implications of this new photographic way of recording images and seeing the world were considerably different to previous methods such as the *camera obscura*. As anticipatory of photography, certain aspects of the *camera obscura* continue into photography. Alpers points out that:

Many characteristics of photographs - those very characteristics that make them so real - are common also to the northern descriptive mode: fragmentariness, arbitrary frames; [and] the immediacy that the first practitioners expressed by claiming that the photograph gave Nature the power to reproduce herself directly unaided by man. (1983:43).⁴⁹

As the *camera obscura*, microscopes and telescopes showed parts of the world inaccessible to natural human vision, the photograph takes this revealing of the invisible further. The photograph allowed previously impossible aspects of vision to be made and *kept* visible. An

⁴⁹ A similar separation of the viewer from the camera device is evident in both the *camera obscura* and the photographic camera "as if visual phenomena are captured and made present without the intervention of a human maker" (Alpers 1983:30). In both devices: "the image spread out on the pictorial surface appears to be an unbounded fragment of a world that continues beyond the canvas . . . the world staining the surface with colour and light, impressing itself upon it; the viewer, neither located nor characterized, perceiving all with an attentive eye but leaving no trace of his presence" (Alpers 1983:27).

instant of time could be recorded, framed and cropped differently; an instantaneous moment of a bird in flight or a running horse could be captured; the micro and macroscopic could be recorded; artists could photograph perishables, people, X-rays, or an instant of a changing landscape and use any of these as references for paintings.

The easier accessibility, affordability and portability of the photograph caused a democratisation of the image. Subject matter was diversified and new contexts for images arose, giving rise to new conventions and ways of seeing. The proliferation of the photographic image allowed the general public to take, make and consume pictures on a scale never before seen in history. Images (such as paintings and drawings) that previously took great skill, time and cost to complete could now instantly be captured and infinitely multiplied at a fraction of the cost. The traditional fine arts of painting, drawing and sculpture were no longer the only means of recording history and likenesses and so painters no longer had the monopoly over image production. This radical shift in the way images were produced and disseminated contributed to a crisis in representation (Crary 1990:1).

Initial reactions such as that of Edgar Allan Poe in 1840 to the introduction of photography were optimistic and trusting of the potential of this new and apparently truthful science, seeing it as "the most important and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science" (in Kriebel 2007:6). Conversely, the indiscriminate and democratic nature of the photograph led Talbot to view photography as a documentary art rather than a science or fine art (Badger 2007:16).⁵⁰ Rosalind Krauss notices that the scientific and empirical discourse of photography in the nineteenth century shifts to an aesthetic discourse in the twentieth century (Kriebel 2007:24). The device that sprung from scientific study became such a widespread part of visual culture that it moves into the visual and aesthetic fabric of every day experience. The debate of whether photography could be seen as an art or a science arose and a greater critical awareness of the constructed and subjective nature of image making emerged. This eventually manifests in structuralist and post-structuralist semiotic theory as has been discussed earlier in this study. This increase in critical awareness did not clarify definitions but rather highlighted how many complexities and contradictions were involved in the photographic process, as the seemingly scientific accuracy of a photograph was, among other things, seen to involve many mechanical and subjective distortions and creative decisions.

Photography may involve documentation, science and creativity but this pluralistic approach was not always so easy to see. Kemp argues:

Looking back on the early years of photography from our perspective, it is easier for us than it was for the pioneers and their audience to see that crucial choices of a subjective

⁵⁰ Documentary art may broadly aim at a more 'objective' recording whereas fine art is generally seen as a more expressive and subjective vision. These distinctions however are brutally reductive as science, art and documentation may combine in multiple ways in any given photograph. As critical awareness arose, it seems that photography encouraged a questioning of the complex relationships between documentation, science and art.

kind at virtually every stage in the process determine the appearance of the photographic image. (Kemp 2006:267).

The taking of a photograph, although involving mechanical process, is still a creative act.⁵¹ Freezing rapid motion and producing X-rays is possible but not necessarily 'truthful' as many decisions on exactly how much contrast to include or exactly which parts of an image are chosen to be blurred and which remain in focus are subjective choices. Kemp says it should be remembered that:

it is the human visual system that initiates any kind of photographic activity, that the end product is rigged to work within the parameters of our sight, and that the images are irredeemably subject to our ways and habits of seeing in all their variability. (2006:268-269).

As all images are increasingly seen to involve some kind of editing or subjective selecting, they become trusted less as documents of so-called objective truth and perhaps more as just one of many interpretive ways of looking. Artists who incorporate the use of photography in their painting process are asserting their subjective and creative vision in the selection and method of painting rather than just objectively copying photographic subject matter, which in the past may have seemed like cheating. An increasing awareness of this subjectivity has perhaps led to a greater acceptance of artists using photographs as source references for paintings.

The photograph was not immediately assimilated into all aspects of life because the technology and accessibility of photography was still developing. Accessibility was an important factor in the extent to which photography could be used.

Rapid developments in photographic technology, including the invention of the lightweight 35 millimetre Leica camera in 1924, the use of perforated film rather than ungainly light-sensitive plates, the heightened photosensitivity of film and photographic paper, the development of the wide aperture lens, and the flashbulb, allowed photographers to work at higher speeds and previously impossible light conditions. In addition, the refinement of the photogravure technique in the early 1900s enabled text and high-quality images to be printed simultaneously on a single page. A new publishing industry emerged that centered (sic) on the picture magazine, soon rivalling text-only newspapers. The mass-reproduced photograph had become an integral part of a new consciousness industry. (Kriebel 2007:8).

As photography became more and more accessible, many artists were fearful that their roles as painters would be made obsolete by this new mimetic tool. However, instead of this prophesised

⁵¹ Exceptions to this statement exist. Photographs from devices such as CCTV surveillance cameras would arguably be seen to involving little to no creative and subjective involvement.

'death of painting',⁵² the photograph has now become a part of the artist's vocabulary (Coke 1972:301) and is a central tool for the photorealist painter.

In the nineteenth century the photograph was most frequently used as a crutch. Only a few artists expanded the potential of their work by using camera vision. In the twentieth century, due to the veritable tidal wave of photographs that appeared in magazines and family albums, the vision of the camera became unavoidable and was absorbed by artists and the public. (Coke 1972:15).

This too has consequences. In 1859 as photography gains mass commercial appeal, Charles Baudelaire sees it as "a form of lunacy," tied to "the stupidity of the masses" resulting in the impoverishment of artistic imagination (1980:83). At best, he regards it as a tool for memory and archival purposes, but never a serious art (Baudelaire 1980:88). Mass images in circulation change the way images are viewed. A general pessimism is sensed in 1927 as Siegfried Kracauer says: "The multitude of photographs displayed in the press . . . forces the beholder to confront the truth of capitalist society: its mechanical superficiality, its banality, its spiritual meaninglessness" (Kriebel 2007:9).⁵³

The impact of industrialisation, globalisation and digitisation on how people process and experience their environment today may often go unnoticed as images and new media become so naturalised in everyday life. Current knowledge may condition contemporary viewers' interpretations to a great degree. This may make it difficult for contemporary viewers to understand how western viewers thought about and related to their visual culture before photography and mass media. In Julian Spalding's view, "all civilisations before our modern age were founded on the notion that the world was flat and fixed in space. This affected what people thought they were looking at" (2005:13). Similarly, Elkins points out that: "Before the invention of airplanes and cars, paintings were substantially harder to see, and before the rise of modern public museums, the majority of paintings were effectively off-limits to most people" (2001:76). Those who caught a glimpse of these artworks would probably only see them for a few minutes and maybe only once in a lifetime and as a result would have to rely on memory. The painting became a thing of "almost religious veneration" (Elkins 2001:76) because of its inaccessibility. You look at something differently if you know it could be for the last time, you study and savour every detail, it gets etched in your memory, and you take time and intensity to take it in.

Through the way images are accessed and 'framed', contemporary technology may have changed how western society interacts with or perceives their context. A great deal of art and culture is not experienced first-hand, but through various forms of mediation. Today most experience of artworks come in the form of "press releases and other publicity material, colour reproductions,

⁵² Refer back to footnote 3 in relation to the 'death of painting'.

⁵³ Added to this, the acceptance of and attitudes towards photography could be steered by various institutions. Christopher Phillips notices how art museums such as the New York Museum of Modern Art play a role in shaping the expectations, general tastes and discourse around photography (Kriebel 2007:25). A reciprocal relationship exists between photography constructing ideology and ideology constructing photography.

catalogue essays, newspaper and magazine reviews, photographs and films of artists, interviews with them, radio and TV arts programmes about them" (Walker 2001:2). Similarly, Scharf maintains: "The greatest impact of most works of art today is rendered not in the direct experience of them, but through their photographic images reproduced in books, in catalogues, in the pictorial magazines or on the screen" (Scharf 1974:324). Today viewers can take home a postcard, print, book or do a quick Google search to jog their memories. When on holiday I catch myself constantly reaching for the camera to do the remembering for me rather than taking the time to really look and experience. Elkins argues that perhaps with such easy access to images, viewers are not forced to really look at art and take the time to properly engage with it; to look as if it is the last time, and because of this are not required to rely only on unstable memories (2007:76). For Elkins, the art object becomes diluted in its effect as it is endlessly reproduced (2007:76).

For Benjamin, the effects of the mass production of images and their disposable nature have differing consequences. Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1999, written in 1936), sees wide scale mechanical reproduction resulting in the artwork losing its sacred and authentic 'aura'. The 'aura' is not an inherent property of the artwork, but is created by knowledge of the artworks uniqueness, its cultural value, limited exhibition potential and public acknowledgement of its value. Benjamin sees early Daguerotypes as still having this 'aura' due to the amount of time and struggle it took to produce them (Kriebel 2007:12). The elite status of art with its ritualistic experience and unique and sacred 'aura' become diffused by being able to make copies. "Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art" (Benjamin 1999:287). "It cut across hierarchies of accepted subject-matter. And in so doing, photography potentially subverted the rigid class structures 19th-century Europe" (Badger 2007:16).

Freeland indicates however, that Benjamin saw this disappearance of the sacred 'aura' of art as a potentially good thing because it allowed new modes of critical perception and democratic and revolutionary forms of art that photography facilitates (2001:120). Photography could thus contribute to social comment and change, but it could also contribute to complacency. According to Benjamin, photography democratises but also distracts, "Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art" (1999:287). Kriebel sees the "split second of exposure" of snapshot photography, allowing instants of time to be recorded and multiplied, as a contributing factor in the freeing of art from ritual and fixed place, making art more democratic but less potent (2007:12).⁵⁴

The new ways and contexts in which images circulate and are used by the media create new connotations and attach new meanings to images (Kriebel 2007:15), and because of this images today are experienced fundamentally differently. Andre Malraux believes photography has brought about a 'museum without walls', ever flexible and changing to meet current needs and

⁵⁴ According to Kriebel, "Photography now transfigures the world by aestheticizing it, reporting on surfaces, not struggle" (Kriebel 2007:11).

demands (in Scharf 1974:324). Art images are no longer just a cultural preserve; the image has lost its fixed object-ness as they can now travel to the viewer in the form of books and other media. The original painting's image is infinitely multiplied and so Berger says that their authority is destroyed as they become part of the mainstream and surround us as language does (1972:19).

However, new media and open platforms of dialogue and ideas exchange can also allow for new authorities to emerge. Dedicated websites, blogs and essays exploring among other things the mysteries of Vermeer's artworks or the process of photorealistic painting can construct an authoritative aura. For Scharf, the wealth of imagery at first world disposal enables a greater intellectualisation of art and a deeper "knowledge of the relationships" rather than just simply offering "pleasure for the eye" (1974:324). In this way, the proliferation of reproductions affects the way art is viewed, not only because "Photographs bring to us the art of the world", but also because this has "transformed our knowledge by facilitating comparison and analysis" (Savedoff 1993:455). This comparison and analysis is perhaps what McLuhan (in Freeland 2001) refers to as a shift in the digital age from linear to mosaic-type thinking. An artwork may no longer be seen as only a single entity, but consists of all the visual and textual documentation surrounding it. In Freeland's interpretation, "New media offer an aid or 'prosthesis' that changes our senses and even our brains to promote non-linear, 'mosaic' thinking, as viewers must fill in the blanks in continuously updated inputs" (2001:126-127).⁵⁵ The paintings of all four artists looked at in this study, as well as various texts and books-to-order discussing their works, are available for viewing on the internet. This facilitates a much greater arena for comparative analysis than what would have been available even twenty years ago.⁵⁶

Digital imagery has revolutionised image production, but it remains an incredibly dense and complex area of study and the effects are not as linear as Freeland and McLuhan make them out to be. For now, it can be acknowledged that the way in which photorealistic paintings are experienced through various media both affects the viewer's reading of them and it affects the photorealist artist's creative choices.

Although Scharf believes it is not yet possible to tell if this changed context of viewing has been a good or a bad thing and that "there is as yet no agreed way of measuring the quality of

⁵⁵ "The invention of print and books prompted many social changes, fostering individualism, linear thinking, privacy, repression of thought and feeling, detachment, specialization and even modern militarization" but that newer media will restore aspects of right-brain functioning such as capacity for connection and insight but also our capacities of integration and imagination suppressed by literacy (Freeland 2001:126).

⁵⁶ However, Freeland warns that the digitisation of images is seen to have other consequences. MTV "threatens to homogenize the world", or those who have access to technology, with mind numbing and formulaic videos rather than facilitating greater democratic participation and fostering genuine critical awareness of viewers (Freeland 2001:129). But this depends on how technology is used. Internet access includes 'Lolcats' (images of cats combined with words with the aim of being humorous) and academic papers and talks such as 'TED talks'. Viewers who have access to technology also have a choice in what they watch and this affects their level of critical awareness and democratic participation.

experience" (1974:324), Savedoff points out that this effects how art is judged.⁵⁷ Savedoff points out that art that reproduces well inevitably gains popularity as reproductions are often the primary source of viewing the majority of artworks.

Our dependence on reproductions favors art which reproduces well or which exists primarily through documentation. Art which depends heavily on non-reproducible properties cannot be successfully understood through photographs, and its influence is thus curtailed. (Savedoff 1993:461).

Photorealism may be argued to reproduce particularly well since it is derived from an already reproducible source. The flatness of the photograph and the painting translates well to glossy pages in books and magazines. Savedoff argues that this affects what artists choose to make and how it is seen even if this is met with some resistance (1993:461). Photorealism may then be a particular response to the new ways in which images travel and are reproduced. Photorealism uses this technology heavily but by existing as original hand-painted objects, they are simultaneously the opposite of this technology and encourage an awareness of the levels of mediation between reality, photography, painting and photographs of paintings.

For the purposes of this study, I am more interested in how painters reacted to photography.⁵⁸ I am interested in the visual and ideological shifts that may occur when reality is translated into a photograph and transformed into a photorealistic painted surface. I start by looking at these shifts in a more general sense and then more specifically in section 4.2 at how they are evident in the work of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself.

Negotiating photography, painting and reality:

Painters reacted to, rejected and assimilated photography in varying ways seeing it as a threat but also an inspiration. Reality needed to be reassessed: Coke comments that the photograph offered new standards of realism as painters:

reacted against and sought inspiration from the simulated realism produced by the camera. In a few years, photography changed the artist's viewpoint both technically and philosophically. Inexact views and flagrantly flattering portraits were tolerated less often, and the role of artist as recorder of nature was encouraged, as standards for judging art began to be based on the kind of exactitude found in photographs. (1972:1).

⁵⁷ Galleries and art competitions often judge art only via reproductions, to the great detriment of those artists whose work does not reproduce well.

⁵⁸ Although I use digital photography in my own artistic practise, the limits of this thesis do not permit a detailed investigation into digital photography and imagery and its broader implications within societies. Traditional and digital photography may share enough similarities to not have to look at the latter in detail. It is also not possible to explore photography theory at any great length. Photographic theory has been thoroughly investigated by Barthes, Krauss, Alan Sekula, Pierre Bordieu, Baudrillard, Michael Foucault, Freud and others already stated (Kriebel 2007:23). For a more thorough investigation into an array of photographic theories, see Elkins' *Photography Theory* (2007) and Richard Bolton's *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (1989).

"Photographs seemed to be a continuation of older 'naturalistic' pictorial codes" but Crary points out that this was "only because their dominant conventions were restricted to a narrow range of technical possibilities" (Crary 2001:133). In truth, photography offered a radically different approach to seeing and making images.

Among many changes, photography led to a reassessment of truth and reality, which painters and photographers had to negotiate in their artworks. A particular example of the ways photography forces the viewer to reassess reality is in Muybridge's photographs of animal and human locomotion, particularly of running horses (fig 22). Before the invention of photography, the running horse was typically painted with all four legs outstretched in the air.⁵⁹ Muybridge's photographs however, proved that a horse's legs in motion moved differently to previously held ideas, even if the general public thought this new discovery looked 'wrong' (Gombrich 2006:25-26). Paul Valéry wrote that artists were both delighted and angry that Muybridge's photographs, "laid bare all the mistakes that sculptors and painters had made in their renderings of the various postures of the horse" (in Leslie 2001:n.pag.). "Once Muybridge's photos appeared, painters like Edgar Degas and Thomas Eakins began consulting them to make their work truer to life" (Leslie 2001:n.pag.). On a philosophical level, the human subject was increasingly perceived to not have full access to reality (such as observing the true locomotion of a horse's legs), as machines were necessary mediators of reality. Previous trust in the accuracy of human observation shifted to a trust in the accuracy of mechanically and chemically produced photographs as new standards for depicting reality were set.

Furthermore, as the camera follows a moving horse, the background is necessarily blurred and appears untrue to knowledge of what the background should be. To capture the background in correct focus as well as the horse would cause the horse's legs to appear blurred. None of these scenarios match the way a viewer actually sees a running horse and so either selected reality or interpreted reality would have to be settled on. Furthermore, each individual viewer may look at a running horse slightly differently. Berger points out that "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice" (1972:9). One viewer may stare only at the blur of legs, another may notice the horse's ears or the crowds behind. In this way, no one 'truth' in an image is to be found. With an awareness of these photographic flaws, Auguste Rodin maintained that it is only the artist who can give a truthful representation (in Leslie 2001:n.pag.). Mitchell Leslie notes how, "Other artists took umbrage. Rodin thundered, 'It is the artist who is truthful and it is photography which lies, for in reality time does not stop'" (Leslie 2001:n.pag.).

At the same time, we have already seen that some artists feared that painting was no longer relevant and useful, because photography could now create far better, easier and more cost effective records and likenesses. This encouraged artists to break away from the traditional mimetic aims of painting, thus liberating painting and reinventing the role of the painter as interpreter instead of recorder. Picasso told his friend, the photographer Brassai:

⁵⁹ "The most common error had been to show the running animal in a 'hobbyhorse' pose, with front and hind legs extended" (Leslie 2001:n.pag.).

When you see what you express through photography, you realize all the things that can no longer be the object of painting. Why should the artist persist in treating subjects that can be established so clearly with the lens of a camera? It would be absurd, wouldn't it? Photography has arrived at a point where it is capable of liberating painting from all literature, from anecdote, and even from the subject. In any case, a certain aspect of the subject now belongs in the domain of photography. So shouldn't painters profit from their newly acquired liberty...to do other things? (Coke 1972:299).⁶⁰

For one stream of painting, the rise of photography may have encouraged abstraction (as seen in Abstract Expressionism, Cubism and Minimalism), but for other streams (such as Impressionism and Photorealism), it was liberating in a very different way. Because painters could use photographs in similar ways to sketchbooks in the past, photography did not spell the end of descriptive painting. Impressionist painters saw the value of using photography as source material. These 'instant sketches' offered a new approach to composition and allowed a much wider variety of subject matter, including being able to capture moments of time, light and movement. "In the days before the invention of photography, painters occasionally represented small segments of reality, but the pictorial conventions of the close-up - seeing tiny portions of reality in isolation - was developed only through photography" (Lindey 1980:92).

The depiction of time is an important factor in photography. Paintings prior to photography and based on direct observation, *camera obscura* projections or preparatory sketches could never freeze an instant of light in the same way photography does. Prior paintings were records of negotiating shifting light over extended periods of time: the time it took to complete a painting. This produced specific visual results. Compare the way subject matter appears to be modelled in a general light in Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith* (fig 6) with the exact frozen shadows on the buildings in Bechtle's *Six Houses on Mound Street* (fig 1).

Using the photograph as subject matter over painting directly from real life has advantages and peculiarities other than the way it crops and captures time. For John Stathatos, the photograph is a special kind of image because it has a "unique relationship with reality, a relationship which has little to do with 'truth', visual or otherwise, but everything to do with the emotional charge generated by the photograph's operation as a memory trace" (in Badger 2007:8). "Yet the photograph is not memory. It is only a trace of memory. And the photographic trace provokes the certainty that something existed, yet it is only a representation of reality and not reality itself" (Badger 2007:8).⁶¹ It gives the *feeling or impression* of direct access to the real; transparent over interpreted, even if the images have been manipulated. This illusion works because although "photography had already abolished the inseparability of observer and *camera obscura*, bound together by a single point of view, and made the new camera an apparatus fundamentally

⁶⁰ Similarly, George Braque said, "painting is getting closer and closer to poetry, now that photography has freed it from the need to tell a story" (Coke 1972:299).

⁶¹ The term 'reality' is used lightly here but again it should be mentioned that it is a complex construct.

independent of the spectator," it still "masqueraded as a transparent and incorporeal intermediary between observer and world" (Crary 2001:136).⁶²

As mentioned earlier, for Barthes, the painting is not reliant on the real in the same way photography is because the photograph depends on a necessarily real object.

I call 'photographic referent' not only the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it . . . in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. This is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. (emphasis in original)(Barthes 1981:76).

This, for Barthes, is the very essence of photography (1981:76-77). Walton believes that as paintings are based on beliefs, "photographs are counterfactually dependant on the photographed scene even if the beliefs (and other intentional attitudes) of the photographer are held fixed" (in Michaels 2007:434). In this way, the photograph provides a "certificate of presence" or proof that something has existed (Barthes 1981:87-88). To paint the photograph, according to Peter Osborne, "is also a certificate of presence, but of another kind: *the presence of the photograph in representation*" (1992:107). Osborne maintains that this establishes a sense of proximity and distance to the photograph and to history (1992:107).

The practise of photorealism, as a painting based on a 'certificate of presence', raises the issue of whether photorealism keeps the authority of the factual record that 'this thing has existed', or if photorealistic painting moves into the territory of make believe. As specific examples are examined, I will argue that it does both, occupying a strange boundary between these two polarities. Some photographs, even though they are still selections, are used as evidence, proof and fact in ways paintings and other representations could never do. Even when photographs become increasingly abstracted they are almost always reliant on existent light bouncing off of real objects. "We think of photographs as fact, but they can also be fiction, metaphor or poetry. They are of the here and now, but they are also immensely potent time capsules" (Badger 2007:7). Barthes refers to a photograph as a "weightless, transparent envelope" (1981:5), an envelope that seems to transport time and appearances without their physicality. In most cases, Barthes' statement may be true: painting can 'feign reality without having seen it', but with increasing editing capabilities with the advent of digital processing, the relationship of a photograph to reality is put into question. In copying the photograph, a painting may retain *some* of the photograph's special relationship to reality.

Photorealism references reality and the 'look of the real' but it does not aim to be reality or some kind of factual truth about the world. For Barthes, the photograph remains incredibly linked to its referent, like "laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both - referent and photo" (1981:6). This link is not a precise one-to-one relationship; it is a

⁶² Although the photograph may so seductively display the real, Susan Sontag asserts that photographs can only show superficial visual surfaces, and not known complex relations below the surface (in Kriebel 2007:19), so it may be only a certain aspect of reality.

similarity, not an exactitude (Kriebel 2007:22). It can be said that a photograph does not copy physical reality, but rather transforms it into a picture which maintains a special relationship to the real.

However, what happens when a photograph is copied in paint? Photorealism poses the question of why an artist would want to so closely copy a photograph. Given the new ability of photography to instantaneously and accurately record the physical world, photorealistic painting seems to be a strange choice for a contemporary artist when one considers the multitude of new modes of art making and technology at an artist's disposal. In the past, mimetic paintings could be seen as amazing, because there were no other means of replicating the world as accurately in colour as paint could. Today however, in copying the physical look of the world onto a flat surface there are quicker, easier and more cost effective methods of producing nearly the same result achieved from spending hours hand painting copies.⁶³ However, if an artist has a reason for changing the appearance of a thing, perhaps to enhance a feeling or expression, then there must be valid reasons for trying to copy an appearance in exacting detail, attempting to change nothing but the medium.

Photorealist painters have often been accused of merely copying or forging an already existing image, but this claim is unfounded. Tom Blackwell says that the process of translating visual information from physical reality or from "photograph changes it very profoundly [because] all the information is filtered through a human sensibility" (Lindey 1980:20-21). Colin Lyas interprets Gombrich's views in maintaining that any representation of the world, even if it captures the resemblance of reality, can never just be a copy because it is always inextricably conditioned by the artist's personal and cultural baggage (1997:41,43). In this way it is not possible to just passively copy the world to make representational resemblances of it; this is not possible for the viewer is always interpreting what is received "according to expectation, memory, cultural background and individual psychology" (Lyas 1997:40). "There is no reality to be resembled independently of those conditioned seeings . . . We do not copy the world. We make it" (Lyas 1997:40). Nelson Goodman similarly maintains: "artists make rather than take reality" (in Lyas 1997:40).

According to Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* (1960), another reason painters can never make exact copies is that:

all claims to copy nature must lead to the demand of representing the infinite. The amount of information reaching us from the visible world is incredibly large, and the artist's medium is inevitably restricted and granular. Even the most meticulous realist can accommodate only a limited number of marks on his panel . . . in the end he will always have to rely on suggestion when it comes to representing the infinitely small. (1960:182-184).

⁶³ Walker compares this to someone painstakingly hand copying a typed page meticulously letter for letter when one can so easily machine print the text (2001:8).

Information always has to be simplified and abstracted, so even paintings with the highest degree of representation can be seen to a degree as a type of abstraction.

A transformation happens from photograph to painting, but this may be an ideological as well as a physical one. Anne McCauley hints at this in saying that although photography is widely accepted in contemporary art practice, it "still suffers from a prestige problem (both financial and intellectual), largely for the same reasons it did in the nineteenth century, and anyone talking about photographic theory needs to admit that" (2007:408). To paint the photograph may be an attempt to reinstate prestige and Benjamin's 'aura'. However, as I will argue, rather than simply maintaining traditional art hierarchies and artists egos, there may be another reason to paint the photograph.

Photographs embody an instant of time. For André Bazin, in the 1960's, photography "does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption" (in Kriebel 2007:17). To transform the instant into paint in an incredibly time consuming manner may reinvest the image with a sense of eternity. Elkins succinctly sums this up:

Paintings show us a single moment, even though they remain fixed for centuries. The ephemeral instant and unending duration are forced very close together, and that is one of painting's special strengths- one of the properties that sets it apart from other forms of art. The instant, the very definition of change, is pressed flat like a dried leaf in a collector's book and made to remain in place indefinitely. (Elkins 2001:140).

A photorealist painting then may include a sense of eternity and an instant of time. By making a mass producible photograph into an original, one-of-a-kind painting it may re-invest the photographic image with an 'aura'. Freeland argues that Benjamin's 'aura' has not disappeared and that although contemporary viewers can see countless reproductions, hundreds of people still flock to see original artworks such as the Mona Lisa (2007:125). In the 1960's, photography enters galleries and art museums as an art in its own right, thus reinstating Benjamin's lost 'aura' (Kriebel 2007:15-16). Freeland goes on to say: "The feeling of awe is almost religious as international crowds file past the mysterious visage that rests, smiling, in her closed glass box. The atmosphere is one of quiet excitement and people record the monumental occasion with videos and snapshots" (2001:125). To this she says: "there is something sadly ironic about visitors' trying to capture her with their own mechanical reproductions" (Freeland 2001:125). This may be a new kind of aura, a way of stilling the mass imagery, making the image unique and asking the viewer to spend time looking. Berger maintains:

Original paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is Even a reproduction hung on a wall is not comparable in this respect for in the original the silence and stillness permeate the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures. (1972:31).

The choice to use photographs rather than painting from direct experience may be attributed to convenience but could also be intimately related to the specific way in which photography captures and transforms physical reality. There is both a synthesis and tension created by combining the traditions, histories and languages of painting and photography within one work.

Painting from photographs may be seen as an “affirmation of photography by painting” (Osborne 1992:106). Photography provides a unique view of the world that photorealist painters respond to. To paint the photograph however, could be both an affirmation of the photographic image in the choice to faithfully ‘copy’ it and a dissatisfaction with its mechanically produced material qualities, hence the need to transform and ‘still’ the image into paint. It is then also, according to Osborne, “an affirmation of painting in the face of photography” (1992:107).

It can be seen that photography can create new ways of picturing and thinking about the world and reality, thereby extending the artist's vocabulary. Photography has filtered into every aspect of modern life, and is commonly linked to ideas of mass reproducibility, disposability and is often seen as a conveyer or reflector of truthful appearances. Painting comes from a long tradition and is commonly linked to ideas about originality, uniqueness, value, the artist's individual interpretation and expression and conventions of being placed in a gallery, which invites a certain contemplative way of looking. Photorealism brings these two traditions together. It takes the disposable, everyday and common, ‘memory’ image of photography and reinvests it with a permanence and stillness that requires contemplation and makes it both special and strange. As will be shown in the sections to follow, the way Bechtle, Van Zyl and I achieve this is subtly different in each of our paintings. These results invite contemplation, tears and emotive responses, and may even bring about an experience of the sublime.

4.2. Looking at selected photorealistic paintings: Bechtle, Van Zyl and Heyer

The paintings of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself exist as contradictions. These paintings seem straightforward, revealing all in their descriptive detail, and yet they resist the viewer’s gaze, unable to reveal anything but a single moment. They seem so real, but at the same time are undeniably flat painted surfaces. The way in which camera vision is carefully utilized in each artist's work allows a particular tension between reality and artifice. The constant play between multiple contradictory states is brought about in numerous ways in these paintings and this contributes to the visual and psychological rewards of experiencing them.

It has been seen that photography may effortlessly masquerade as a transparent intermediary to reality but closer inspection reveals that it may also distort and affect how reality is represented in paint. For Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself, the photograph is not a substitute for reality; it is a means of picturing reality in a different way and in some cases, the photograph is a reality and subject matter in itself. This is evident in all three artists’ paintings. This section comprises an analysis of how the three artists in question negotiate reality through photography and painting. A common thread that emerges in all three painters' works is the play between multiple contradictory states, and will be analysed further.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ This chapter relies heavily on my own personal experiences. The conclusions drawn on Bechtle and Van Zyl's methodologies are largely assumptions based on my own observations of their final work since I could not interview them myself.

Photographs, composition and subject matter:

As shown in Chapter Three, Vermeer seems to have faithfully copied the image produced by the *camera obscura* resulting in an image that appears curiously life-like even though numerous distortions are included. Although similar to the distorted picture of reality offered by the *camera obscura*, photography further mediates and manipulates reality. This has opened up additional conveniences and curious distortions for the artist attempting to depict the real. A particularly photographic mode of composition and photographically translated subject matter is evident in Bechtle, Van Zyl and my own paintings but is utilised differently in each.

Photographs have been used by artists since their inception but it is not until the American Photorealist movement in the 1960's and 1970's that the photograph is used as subject matter in the most extreme exactitude possible. Bechtle is seen as one of the first of these American Photorealist painters who made paintings that literally look like photographs. Living in California, he continues to paint today and so may be considered both a pioneer of the Photorealist movement and a contemporary photorealist painter. His subject matter focuses mostly on mundane family snapshot portraits, suburban street scenes and parked cars. Selected paintings by Bechtle, those largely devoid of people and plants, have been chosen because they share certain similarities to Van Zyl's photorealistic⁶⁵ paintings and my own photorealistic paintings, and should not be seen as representative of his entire oeuvre.

Van Zyl, a South African born painter, has specifically been chosen for this study because some of my paintings have similar photographically derived subject matter to his hospital paintings. A selection of his *Hospitaal tyd/ Hospital Time* series painted in 2004 are the only paintings of his looked at in this study and were the last to be completed before the artist passed away in 2006. These paintings focus on still-life hospital scenes and hospital interiors and exteriors often juxtaposed with images of an ocean in turmoil.⁶⁶ Van Zyl has been an influence on my own work and this is evident in subtle overlaps of subject matter. I was aware of his hospital paintings at the time my hospital series was being made and although I had not seen many of his paintings, I consciously deviated from his vision of hospitals. In the technique and juxtaposition of images within the works, Van Zyl's and my paintings differ in significant ways.

My current body of work consists of only 19 paintings and were exhibited in February 2010 as the practical component of this Master's degree (See Addendum 2 for a supplementary catalogue documenting this exhibition). Subject matter is exclusively focussed on interior architectural

⁶⁵ Van Zyl would likely have disagreed with being labelled as photorealist. Marlene van Niekerk says Van Zyl was clear about photographs only being a source, "'n vertrekpunt, 'n geriefsmiddel'" (translated in English, "a starting point, a medium of convenience") (2007:32). Van Zyl admits to having started off in the 1970's being inspired by Photorealism but says: "I eventually realised that my interest lay elsewhere. The movement of Photo Realism was focused more on the photo quality than the subject. If I had to define my work, I suppose I would call it Romantic Realism" (in Woulidge 2000:44). However, because he used photographs as his source material and because these photographs were copied with a high degree of accuracy, for the purposes of this study his work is referred to as photorealistic.

⁶⁶ Other subject matter Van Zyl focussed on excluded from this study includes lighthouses, abandoned mine buildings, coastal graves and graveyards, and early work includes bathers seated and in change rooms.

scenes. These compositions are largely views of empty rooms and passages with the occasional chair or cupboard. Only one painting, *Passages* (fig 23), includes a human subject.

Similarities in mood and atmosphere may be evident in all three of these artists' works. Some similarities may be evident in a particular bland, urban and empty architectural subject matter and the fact that each artist has used photographs to paint from. Each artist focuses on urban and suburban architecture where a particular stillness and silence can be found in the capturing of a fleeting moment. Although certain similarities may be traced through Bechtle, Van Zyl and my own work, each uses photographic source material and painting methods in subtly and sometimes obviously different ways. These important differences may result in quite dissimilar emotive and visual effects. The visible effects and evidence in each artist's paintings is looked at first.

The use of photography to mediate reality instead of painting from direct experience has many effects on what and how Bechtle, Van Zyl and I choose to paint. Photography plays a pivotal role in the sourcing of this subject matter. Vermeer may have been limited in his use of the *camera obscura* to depict only subject matter in his studio or from the studio window but armed with a photographic camera, Bechtle sources his images from his surrounding environment with ease:

For more than forty years Bechtle has pursued a quiet realism based on the things he knows best — family, cars, houses, neighbourhoods — translating what seem to be ordinary scenes of middle-class American life into extraordinary paintings. He works from photographs of familiar subjects (his family and home, for example) to depict precise moments in time. (SFMOMA: Robert Bechtle 1998-2010:n.pag.).

Van Zyl and I source photographic imagery further afield. In Van Zyl's earlier work, subject matter is found along journeys. Titles such as *Swakopmund*, *Shark Island*, *Luderitz*, *La Jument*, *Cape Columbine*, *Diaz Point 1*, and subject matter including lighthouses, graves and buildings depict manmade structures and names that mark boundary points or thresholds. In his later work, Van Zyl looks at surroundings from his experience in Tygerberg hospital, painting the rooms and corridors. This may be indicative of another kind of journey or boundary.

In the sourcing of subject matter, the portability of the camera allows any view or scene to be taken and kept by the artist for later use. The subject matter Bechtle, Van Zyl and I paint is reliant on a specific moment of light, more specifically the way objects are illuminated in a single moment. These places, many of which are public buildings or streets, are generally not suitable for an artist to 'set up shop' in. In my own experience, the search for specific interiors does not reveal ideal subject matter. It is only through the manipulations available with photography via longer exposures, specific light settings and so on that the space can be transformed to become the particular kind of luminous image I require.⁶⁷ My real-life experience of the spaces I paint is

⁶⁷ I tend to work mostly with digital photographs as they have been taken although sometimes minor adjustments are made in Photoshop. Most manipulation of the way a scene is recorded takes place when it is photographed through the camera settings. I do not heavily stage scenes apart from turning the occasional light off, moving a distracting object out of the way or adjusting the position of a chair.

unremarkable but in them, I recognise a potential. Through photography one can *transform* a space and thereby offer a new vision of a place. It opens up an infinite visual vocabulary previously inaccessible to artists. The painting of the photograph further interprets it by investing an embodiedness and stillness to an otherwise seemingly disposable image. Snyder and Allen maintain that: “the sort of experience we have in looking at the photograph is available only through representations, not directly from nature” (1975:167).

The photograph is very good at capturing, marking or arresting a precise moment in time. This photographic stillness, captured in paint by Bechtle, van Zyl and myself seems to contradict the transitory nature of subject matter such as public buildings, streets, cars and hospitals. A strange tension between implied movement and stillness is created. The stilled moment in these paintings seems reminiscent of Vermeer's paintings and may be attributable to a camera mode of vision.

In my own work, I search for familiar institutional buildings such as town halls, public historical buildings, hospitals, hostels, places of learning and homes and buildings in the process of renovation. What these buildings have in common is a sense of temporary human presence. Their interiors are brutally functional without the comforts of home and so become necessary places to pass through but not to stay. Ironically, photography allows me to pass through a scene as well as to 'stay' transfixed on it as I can hold the scene's image in place with a photograph. In a similar way to Van Zyl's work, these spaces may be seen as transitory and somewhat alienating. Bechtle's many paintings of street scenes and corners also indicate boundaries and transit. The exteriors of homes are depicted from the street and give a sense of exclusion from the warmth and comfort of home. A street is not typically seen as a place to stay but is a necessary connector between destinations. This transitory subject matter is contrasted with the eternal and fixed nature of the photographic and painted image.

As has been seen, in comparison to direct experience, using a photographic camera to mediate reality changes how that reality is translated into paint. More specifically, it affects what is painted in terms of compositional choices and accessibility, it facilitates the collaging of images and it can capture but also distort moments of light. The way light is presented in the paintings of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself is a particularly photographic manipulation. Many of these paintings show a very specific moment of light. Bechtle's *20th and Texas, Early Evening* (fig 24) relies on a small portion of the day when the strange illumination of dusk and electric streetlights combine to form soft halos around the streetlights. Logistically this scene would hardly be possible to paint from life due to its location and shifting light, and so photography allows new views of the world to be painted.

I am reliant on the camera's ability to suspend time: to fix the very specific moment of light, when the sun coming through a window casts an exact shadow on the far wall of a triangular

Manipulation is kept to a minimum. I am unable to tell if Van Zyl or Bechtle heavily manipulated their photographed scenes or the photographs themselves, although it appears as though they did not. Bechtle uses projected photographic slides to work from, which would make manipulation to the image itself difficult. I can only guess that Van Zyl did not use digital photography.

room, seen in my *Two Chairs* (fig 31). Another photographic manipulation relates to colour. Light is colour, and the way the camera records light differs to what would have naturally been seen. By minor adjustments in camera settings, a seemingly white room appears in subtle shades of green. This is evident in my painting *Room 1* (fig 25).⁶⁸ I often photograph a space many times which results in multiple versions of the same space. *Fragment* (fig 26) only revealed a brilliant electric blue patch in the top left hand corner through the intervention of the camera adjusted to specific settings. In direct natural vision, this blue area was not as visibly saturated. These manipulations aid in transforming an ordinary space and allow for visually interesting and strange subject matter to paint.

In order for the scene to generally appear tonally correct when photographed, detail in light and dark areas is often sacrificed resulting in further interesting visual effects. This detail would have been visible to the naked eye due to its ability to constantly adjust the pupil size for differently lit areas of a scene. These light distortions obtained through photographs can be seen in Van Zyl's *Waiting Room* (fig 27) and my *Hospital 1* and *Hospital 2* (figs 28 & 29) where the view beyond the window appears as a blinding white. Similarly, photographic evidence and distortions can be seen in the top left hand regions of my paintings *Passages* (fig 23) and *Currents 3* (fig 30) and Bechtle's *20th and Mississippi – Night* (fig 31), where the electric lights appear only as vague enlarged patches of white. The streetlights in Bechtle's painting show a telltale lens flare as light is distorted and reflected through the camera's lens system. Rather than visually disturbing, these distortions of light may contribute to creating a visual harmony because detail is obscured and contrast is heightened.

In searching for subject matter, the photographic camera may affect what is selected because it pre-defines a composition through the framed viewfinder of the camera. Standard cameras tend to dictate specific portrait or landscape formats. Choosing to record a specific scene as seen through the camera's viewfinder is based on how the composition looks in this given format. Although photographs can be cropped and collaged at a later stage, differing formats may affect what artists choose to photograph in the first place.⁶⁹

Bechtle seems to paint from only one photograph with minor deletions (2005:130). Kalina notes: "Others combine source photographs to create a working image. Bechtle keeps it simple. He shoots a slide, crops it and uses what he sees, subject to the occasional deletion or minor rearrangement" (2005:130). In my own process, as I cannot speak for Bechtle or Van Zyl, when viewing a selection of physical photographs together, certain adjustments may become apparent,

⁶⁸ In this case, the photographic manipulation of colour was the result of a happy accident due to inferior printing machines. When the same photograph was printed professionally, the room appeared too white and light and thus not suitable for a painting. In most cases, I consciously manipulate the settings on my camera and sometimes on my computer to achieve the desired result.

⁶⁹ Being overly aware of how the rectangular formats of standard single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras affect my compositional choices, in the past I have attempted to place square viewfinders in front of the camera lens in an attempt to alter these compositional choices. This however only makes the process more awkward as the borders of the image appear blurred and distracting. To date I have not found a better solution other than cropping images after they have been taken.

some easier than others. From the pre-selected composition in a photograph, I occasionally extend a composition downwards, as seen in *Hospital 1* and *Hospital 2* (figs 28 & 29). Here the extended areas are dark and detail is minimal preventing the extension from appearing unnatural or distracting.

Although I faithfully copy the photograph, my compositions are occasionally collaged from multiple photographs. The structure of architectural spaces makes it easier to extend a given scene to the sides in a panoramic fashion. This is further facilitated by being able to view photographs together and seeing relationships between them emerge. Furthermore, when set side-by-side, individual photographs of the same scene taken from different angles may appear distorted, but this is easily rectified in the painting process. Ironically then, painting can be seen as an aid to photography. In composing *Untitled I* (fig 32), four photographs taken from two locations are used and placed to the sides of each other (fig 33). The predominant vertical lines in photographs of architectural spaces are easily joined without appearing distracting and a sense of visual harmony is maintained. As a result, the viewer seldom notices this manipulation.

In being able to combine photographs, the focal point of a one-point-perspective scene is often shifted to the left or right without the corresponding depth lines changing as they would in the physical experience of the scene. This is most obvious in my painting *Room 2* (fig 34). The focal point is situated just to the left of the window. Technically this point should fall somewhere along the middle vertical axis of the painting if it is to correspond to appearances as experienced in reality. Again, this subtle manipulation may go unnoticed by a viewer but it may add an underlying sense of unease.

Van Zyl makes use of multiple photographs for an artwork in a different way by placing them side by side as a diptych instead. This is seen in *Hospital Diptych 3* (fig 35) and *Hospital Diptych 1 - The Waiting Room* (fig 36). The individual paintings in a diptych take on new meaning when seen together. The still, formal and confined hospital rooms are contrasted with the organic turmoil of the waves. Hours spent waiting seem to take on an emotional angst in the cold and unpredictable watery expanse. The separate images are read together to form a unique visual dialogue rather than a strange unity as in some of my own work. The choice to combine images, whether placed side by side or collaged in multiple ways, may be seen as an influence of photography. It may be more apparent to combine multiple photographs when seen placed next to each other than relying on memory or direct experience of different scenes.

The way photography structures space as flat shapes is another feature that may inform an artist's choices. Bechtle mentions that he has never been particularly interested in cars and sees them rather as still life objects: "They were essentially things from which one could arrange shapes to create a painting which was essentially not really abstract but in which the abstract elements were certainly very important" (Bechtle 2005a:n.pag.). Seeing objects in terms of shapes echoes a particularly camera informed mode of vision as laid out in Chapter Three. Again I am reminded of Gowing 's comments about Vermeer not seeming to know what he is painting when he focuses on a 'wedge of light' rather than a finger: "nothing concerns him but what is visible, the tone, the wedge of light" (1952:23). Although the subject matter in photorealistic paintings is important, the way it is arranged in terms of shapes and tone seems almost to gain

more importance than what objects the shapes ultimately become. Bechtle specifically mentions that: "The nature of painting is that when you are putting paint down, it's all about shapes and colour relationships, and edges and flat patches of this and that, and it only becomes the thing that you're painting if you get those things in the right place" (2005c:n.pag.).

The subject matter chosen by all three painters has a neo-classical rigidity and structured feel lending a calm order to each scene. Architecture provides many straight lines that frame and visually cut the space. In the way that Vermeer's curtains (see fig 6 and fig 11) serve to frame some of his paintings, I become aware of how walls seem to share a similar function in my paintings. *Two Chairs* (fig 37) shows a piercing space bordered on each side by vertical walls, framing the narrow entrance into the dark room. The wide-angle camera lens used to take the source photograph compresses the space slightly and heightens the contrast. A similar device used to enhance and manipulate the sense of depth in a room is seen in Van Zyl's painting *Operating Theatre 1* (fig 38). The light grey operating theatre door is pictured close to the viewer and so enhances the dark and piercing depth of the room to the left. This scene is literally divided down the middle. My *Untitled* (fig 32) uses a similar visual device but in a different way. It shows a piercing passage in the left hand section of the painting and a closed door closely facing the viewer to the right. For the viewer, this may simultaneously juxtapose the sense of mental or physical accessibility and inaccessibility to a painting and to public spaces. These closed doors in one half of the scene create barriers that distance the viewer but also incite curiosity about what lies beyond.

The use of photography thus seems to create a greater awareness of composition and how shapes and lines interact with each other. The predominance of vertical and horizontal lines seen in Bechtle, Van Zyl and my paintings adds to a sense of restful stillness. Diagonals as seen in Bechtle's *Texas Street Intersection* (fig 39) create a sense of tension and unease as the street seems to give way under the weight of the car and building to the left. Diagonals can create a sense of balance and maintain a sense of calm when they are intersected with counter-diagonals. These intersecting diagonals are evident in paintings such as Van Zyl's *Hospital Diptych 3* (fig 35), seen in the bed-rail and the front edge of the bed, and *Arrival* (fig 2). Intersecting diagonals are similarly seen in Bechtle's *Alameda Gran Torino* (fig 40), in the intersecting pavement and driveway, *Sunset Garage* (fig 41), in the lower concrete slabs, in my *Two Chairs* (fig 37) and in *Currents 3* (fig 30).

As has been seen, photography offers many new ways of composing paintings and sourcing and transforming subject matter. This is further complexified in that the photorealist use of photography is both expressive of a contemporary photographic mode of vision, while at the same time hiding many aspects of this photographic use.

The photograph as a transparent and objective intermediary to the real:

In the 1980's, some theorists still trusted the image produced by the camera as 'truthful' and 'objective' even though semiotic theory was beginning to seriously question this 'truth'. Snyder argues that the photographic image has become a naturalised part of how the world is seen in countries exposed to wide scale print media:

The problems engendered by the analysis of photographs come about, in great part, because of a peculiar set of beliefs concerning the camera that have grown up during the past two centuries. The camera has taken on the status of natural machine – the giver of ‘the image of nature’. (1980:510).

For Gombrich (1980), the photograph has become so naturalised that it seems to offer a kind of truth.

But whether or not we are used to taking snapshots ourselves, we have seen so many that we can classify them and understand them. We have adjusted to the peculiarities of the arrested image and accept it as ‘true’ for its evocative rather than its informative qualities. (Gombrich 1980:270).

A viewer need not see the details of the streetlight's light bulb in Bechtle's *20th and Mississippi – Night* (fig 31) to know they are looking at a depiction of a streetlight. Similarly, if a viewer observes a photographic depiction of a running horse with blurred legs, they do not necessarily think the horse's legs actually are that way but just that they appear blurred due to photographic limitations. The rise in digital photography and the accessibility and ease of image manipulation today has arguably made viewers more sceptical of images being manipulated. Even so, remnants of a previous trust in photographs may remain. This is somewhat dependant on the context a photograph is seen in. A viewer may be more inclined to trust a friend's holiday snapshots as 'truthful' over an image of a model in a magazine. Furthermore, the majority of photographs still closely mimic the array of patches of light as they appear on the human retina. They still have a close correlation to the way the world appears in natural vision. For this reason, photographs may still *appear* to transparently and truthfully convey reality even if a viewer may know an image has been manipulated. A photograph may *appear* visually truthful and objective while being known to not *be* truthful or trusted as visual fact. In this way, a photograph may seem to be a transparent and objective intermediary to the real.

The use of photography as source material is concealed and revealed to varying degrees in the work of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself. The specific camera angles chosen, the refined treatment of painted edges, meticulous detail, the lack of brushstrokes and lack of obvious narrative in subject matter and titles can be contributing factors in veiling the subjective presence of the artist and creating a seemingly objective sense of reality. These are all used in various ways and to varying degrees by Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself.

Of the many ways in which a photograph can convey a sense of objectivity, the appearance of snapshot photography typically seems un-manipulated and therefore objective to a degree. Strangely cropped figures and forms, such as the seemingly random cut-off nose of the car in Bechtle's *Texas Street Intersection* (fig 39), and badly lit subject matter from everyday scenes appear casually accidental. As these are often the aspects of photographs that are edited out or manipulated, the choice to include them may seem like raw, honest, unprofessional photography. Arguably before the photograph, paintings looked more staged and only 'perfect' arranged compositions were painted. After photography, accidental compositions and cropping of subject matter appears more readily in paintings. This snapshot style of capturing images is evident especially in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings.

Bechtle overtly tries to create an un-manipulated photograph to work from, or to create the 'look' of an un-manipulated image. He admits to deliberately creating the artless look of "a real-estate photograph" (in Kalina 2005:133). In this way, Bechtle seems to celebrate the accidental snapshot photograph and to play with a familiar type of seemingly casual and un-manipulated image, something Van Zyl and I do not overtly do. He seems to heighten this sense of familiarity to photographic views in his paintings as his work is "grounded in the factual, in the complex world of appearances. The utter familiarity of his subject matter – both the scene itself and the look of the source photograph – allows Bechtle's paintings to slip in under the radar" (Kalina 2005:137). This is one way Bechtle's work conveys a sense of objectivity as the viewer is perhaps less inclined to suspect that his images have been manipulated.

The unexaggerated camera angles chosen, neither too wide or too narrow and typically front-on in Bechtle, Van Zyl and my own work, the rather naturalistic colour choice and banal everyday subject matter appear to offer a neutral and objective position. The viewer is subtly made aware of their distanced and yet ordinary orientation to the scene. Because most of the source photographs of Bechtle, Van Zyl and my own paintings are photographed from a relatively standard standing human eye height, the subjective position of the viewer/photographer may go relatively unnoticed due to its normality. In referencing the snapshot photograph, Bechtle seems to attract some attention to this very normality and banality of this standard point of view.

Although each artist has copied the source photograph to varying degrees, little evidence of the *physicality* of the photograph as an object is included such as the photograph's edges, scratches on the surface or light reflected on the surface. The smooth and glossy surface of my paintings however, somewhat mimics that of a glossy photograph. I respond to and try to emulate the photograph's unified glossy surface, and the way in which this makes colours seem rich and saturated. This is achieved through thin layers of varnish and is an aspect of mimicking the photograph not seen in Bechtle and Van Zyl's paintings, which are left matte.⁷⁰

The way a photograph records reality differently to how a viewer may see is evident in the paintings of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself. The naked eye does not see objects as harshly cropped. Natural vision occurs in a continuous and moving space and so partially seen objects are regarded as just outside of a particular field of vision. In referring to one of Bechtle's car paintings such as *Alameda Gran Torino* (fig 40), Kalina maintains:

But this is also a painting in which the *look* of a photograph is closely attended to: the monocular flattening, the combination of spatial squeeze and equally weighted detail. We know that visual space and feel comfortable with it. This innate acceptance gives Bechtle plenty of room to maneuver (sic), to turn up the heat without our much noticing. (emphasis in original)(2005:133).

⁷⁰ Although photorealist painters may work from matte photographs and projections of photographs, reproducing a glossy photo-like surface in a painting immediately seems to reference the surface of glossy photographs.

A tension between the look of a mechanically and instantly produced photograph, and the subtle evidence and knowledge of the artist's hand as the tedious process of layering each paint mark individually over weeks, is set up in photorealistic paintings. Bechtle seems to underscore the tension between the instant and disposable snapshot moment and the timeless lasting quality and laborious process of painting.

In Bechtle's early paintings and in and my own work, every effort has been made to eliminate brush marks and in so doing the paintings mimic the source photograph more closely. In close-up details of *Hospital 2* (fig 42) and Bechtle's *Alameda Gran Torino* (fig 43), brushstrokes are barely evident. This seems to create a more convincing illusion of reality and allows for a greater sense of disbelief when the viewer discovers the painting is not a photograph. Eliminating brushstrokes minimises the artist's subjective presence, thus allowing the painting to seemingly operate, as photographs may do, as a more transparent intermediary to the real.

Although brushstrokes may be greatly eliminated, inevitably subtle differences in the painting when compared to the source photograph will remain (see figs 32 and 33). A perfect copy from photograph to paint is invariably not possible. In my paintings, through the process of layering tinted glazes, light refracts and reflects differently through the translucent surface. Layers of paint can be seen subtly suspended and slight textures and raised areas of paint are visible upon close inspection. This is something only visible in actually experiencing the painting, and is not visible in reproductions.

However, the changes and transformations that occur between the photograph and the painting may be intentional or unintentional *deviations* from the source photograph. This view is evident in descriptions of Bechtle's work:

Despite their photographic origins, however, his canvases are resolutely and finally about painting. Underneath the smooth sheen of their surfaces lies a textured web of strokes and dabs, where abstract shapes meet edges to form an intricate, layered view of our environment. (SFMOMA: Robert Bechtle 1998-2010:n.pag.).

Bechtle's paintings are ambiguous. His earlier works appear to hide brush marks (fig 43), but more recent work, while still providing convincing illusions, becomes increasingly impressionistic. In a video recording demonstrating his painting technique he adds impressionist daubs of red on blue contrary to what he sees in the photograph or photographic projection (Bechtle 2005c:n.pag.). He then paints over some of these areas again so they are barely evident but add a type of vibrancy that he says better matches the actual experience of the scene.⁷¹ These additions of red and blue marks are evident in detail sections of *Texas Street Intersection* (fig 44), and *Sunset Garage* (fig 45). Ironically, he mentions that these expressive marks are included to make his paintings more true to real life experience as vision is constantly shifting.

⁷¹ Perhaps Bechtle is aware of the fact that all oil paints become more translucent to varying degrees over a number of years (this is called *pentimento*), with the result that the under-painting often begins to appear through the layers of paint (Meyer 1951(1991):160). A network of complimentary colours under the final layers will then likely become subtly more evident as time passes and will produce specific visual results.

These subtle manipulations may go unnoticed by the viewer but they invest the painting with a vibrancy and subjectivity the photograph cannot have. The inclusion of these photographic deviations is an important difference between the photograph and the photorealistic painting. By revealing the painted-ness of the canvas, Bechtle departs from his photographic source. However, his work is complex and many painting methods are used simultaneously. In Bechtle's work, a further attempt at producing a more convincing illusion is evident:

He [Bechtle] maintains extreme crispness but avoids a distracting 'cutout' look by various tactics, among them the painting of very thin halation lines paralleling a contour, or the breaking of a smooth edge and the insertion of a bordering area's colors and forms. (Kalina 2005:133).

The reader is reminded again of Vermeer's blurring of edges and forms due to the characteristic limited focal plane and projection field of the *camera obscura*. The subtle blurring of edges evident in many photorealist paintings seems to be an element of camera vision carried through from the seventeenth century use of camera devices. In a similar way to Bechtle, I pay particular attention to diffusing and blending edges in my own paintings, as the edges are often diffused in the source photographs themselves. This careful attention to edges seems to allow for a more convincing illusion. While this may veil the presence of the artist, it may also draw attention to the photographic look of the painting and in so doing, to the laborious task of making a painting look like a photograph. These paintings then vacillate between their painted fact, the look of the photograph and the illusion of reality, never comfortably settling on any one aspect.

In certain paintings, Van Zyl tends to offer a more cut-out look in his treatment of edge, emphasising more clearly the painted fact of his compositions. In *Hospital Diptych 3* (fig 35) the edges do not seamlessly blend into each other but appear almost cut-out. Some edges, such as those seen around the black bed-rail, are strangely surrounded by a white edge. This somewhat disturbs the seamless illusion of depth and brings the viewer's attention to the reality of the painted canvas surface. These distracting edges are more evident in some works than others. *Arrival* (fig 2) and *Operating Theatre 1* (fig 38) show almost none of these edges and so seem to offer a seamless illusion of three-dimensional space.⁷² Van Zyl offers a slightly more painterly approach in parts of his paintings as he leaves behind obvious evidence of paintbrush marks and even paint splatters. This is especially evident in some of his earlier works but also in later works such as *Hospital Diptych 1 - The Waiting Room* (fig 36) where painted brush marks are seen in the walls and floor where parts of the canvas show through the paint. He seems to have consciously wanted to create an awareness of the image as a painting and to reveal his subjective mark. As a result, a tension between the illusion and the physicality of the paint is set up.

⁷² Stefan Hundt mentions that: "Adriaan was still going to complete additional works for the Hospitaaltyd series to augment the exhibition. This was not to be. By this time Adriaan no longer felt in the mental or physical condition to continue to work on the exhibition" (Hundt & Botha 2007:7). Although I initially thought Van Zyl's deteriorating health might have been a reason for these unfinished-seeming edges, I have since seen some of his earlier works in which the edges have been treated similarly, potentially indicating that this was intentional. that these edges were intentional.

A further tension is evident in that the surfaces in most of Bechtle's, Van Zyl's and my own paintings all appear 'hard' and 'cold'. Even the blankets and sheets on Van Zyl's hospital bed in *Arrival* (fig 2) and *Hospital Diptych 3* (fig 35) appear more as cold plastic than comforting cloth. While seductively painted in smooth transitions of colour and reflecting glints of light, the bare functionality of public pavements, passages, walls, steel beds and cheap chairs feels uninviting. In this way, they attract but also repel and distance the viewer. The familiar bustle of a hospital is distanced from the viewer in Van Zyl's *Hospital Diptych 3* (fig 35). "The image on the left portrays a space where the daily drama of the hospital room is denied with a quasi-religious stillness" (Viljoen 2009:7). This quietness can make an ordinary scene feel incredibly strange.

Changes from reality, to photograph, and to paint are evident in the appearance but also in the viewer's knowledge that in the painting, each mark has been individually applied and subtly blended. The subjective presence of the artist is evident in Van Zyl's and Bechtle's later work more so than my own. Van Robbroeck says of Van Zyl's paintings: "The mark of his individual consciousness does not reside in the vulgar expressiveness of the gesture, or the presence of a Great Concept, but in the layered saturation resulting from hours and hours of mindful application" (2007:49). Furthermore, she notes that: "The felt presence of the artist is the product of gradual accrual; the painting is permeated with this subtle presence, as clothes worn frequently absorb the smell and shape of their owner" (Van Robbroeck 2007:40). Although Van Zyl seems not to intend to hide all his brush marks, even those areas in his paintings, in Bechtle's and my own where brushstrokes are veiled can also reveal the presence of the artist and the paint used to construct the painting.

In Kuspit's (2009) view, the decision to meticulously copy a photograph can create an unusual sense of objective distancing from both the artist and the viewer. He believes that the relationship between a Photorealist painting and reality has to do with relating the inner reality of the viewer with the outer reality of everything else (Kuspit 2009:n.pag.). In his view, Photorealist paintings offer a brutal objectivity leaving no room for a subjective response:

what is special about Photorealist art [as opposed to other kinds of painting] is that it makes no attempt to relate inner and outer reality - to suggest an intermediate area of experience in which the me (subject) and not-me (object) mingle. . . . There is no trace of atmosphere in Photorealist works - none of the romanticization of atmosphere that is a sign of subjective investment in the objective world. Indeed, the peculiar atmospherelessness of Photorealist paintings . . . suggests clear-eyed acceptance of objective reality, and with that our separateness from it. But this is why the world, seen through a Photorealist lens, seems disturbingly unreal: it is impossible to reconcile ourselves to -- let alone feel comfortably at home in - a world in which we can gain no subjective foothold. (Kuspit 2009:n.pag.).

This however, seems to be an extreme viewpoint. At times, a photorealist painting may seem objective but even the construction of a seeming 'objectivity' is a subjective choice and process. The American Photorealist painter Chuck Close sees the camera as objective: "The camera is objective. When it records a face it can't make any hierarchal decisions about a nose being more important than a cheek. The camera is not aware of what it is looking at" (in Coke 1972:75).

However, the photographer still chooses where to point the camera and which settings to use. Neil Maccormick states: “Despite the clear headed, objective nature of the photorealistic process there is an intuitive side to the work, namely the taking of the photograph” (Maccormick 2009:n.pag.).

Subjective choices are required in the selection of the scene, the chosen camera settings, the manipulation of lighting through lenses, lighting the scene or choosing the appropriate time of day, the way the photograph is translated in paint and the subtle manipulation of colours among others. In this way, there is both a seeming neutrality to what the photograph records and a creative act on the part of the photographer or artist. Furthermore, among the mass of visual imagery and visual stimuli in the world, the artist carefully selects a miniscule portion of that field of vision to focus an entire career on. This small selection can be deeply expressive of the artist’s subjective concerns. The *selection* of individual photographs and the way they read as a group when exhibited together is a creative and expressive act. There is a subtle play between objectivity and subjectivity in photorealistic paintings and this is evident in the works of the three artists in question.

The specific choice of subject matter has further implications as it can offer social commentary. By drawing imagery from the world around them, Bechtle, Van Zyl and I, in our own personal ways, reflect on our contemporary experience and offer subtle commentaries of the world around us. In the use of photographic source material, photorealistic paintings may retain some of what Badger and Barthes refer to as the proof or certainty that something has existed (Badger 2007:8; Barthes 1981:87-88) and in so doing, are able to comment on real world scenarios in a more direct as opposed to imaginative manner.

The interiors of Tygerberg Hospital that Van Zyl paints seem to reveal a purely functional inhuman environment. This may serve as a comment on the impersonal appearance of the public health care system in South Africa and a lack of concern for the patient's comfort. Claire Wolf Krantz interprets Van Zyl’s hospital paintings to convey “powerful emotions, of the fear and dread associated with serious illness, of being trapped in a large institution, and of feeling invisible in an atmosphere of anonymity” (s.a.:n.pag.). Van Niekerk maintains that this reveals an ironic stance on the part of the hospital’s aims (2007:38). The hospital’s *gedenkboek* (remembrance book) states that:

Dit word dan ook vertrou dat hierdie hospital nie slegs gesien sal word as ‘n koue en onpersoonlike kolos . . . maar as ‘n plek met innig menslike warmte en ‘n toevlugsoord vir die liggaamlike en geestelik vermoeide. (It is trusted that this hospital will not only be seen as a colossal cold and impersonal space . . . but as a place with honest human warmth and a refuge for physical and spiritual or psychological tiredness). (Van Niekerk 2007:38).

Van Zyl’s hospital paintings seem to show none of this warmth and care, only the cold and sterile surfaces of things. The Hospital’s aims are contradicted in the remembrance book, under the title of “*Styl en Afwerking*” (“style and finish”), in that the design is stated to be purely functional: “*Alles is gerig op die funksionele*” (“Everything is directed towards functionality”)(Van Niekerk 2007:38). The cold and functional environments in paintings such as *Arrival* (fig 2), *Waiting Room*

(fig 27), *Hospital Diptych 3* (fig 35), *Hospital Diptych 1 – The Waiting Room* (fig 36) and *Operating Theatre 1* (fig 38) leave the viewer with even greater empathy for the patient's mental and physical vulnerability. In a somewhat less pronounced way, my paintings may also be seen to reveal and comment on the stark, functional, cold and inhuman appearance of public buildings and hospitals surrounding Cape Town. However, Van Zyl's paintings, as well as Bechtle's, Vermeer's and my own are ambiguous in how ordinary subject matter is aestheticised in them. It seems ironic that ordinary, unattractive and even depressing subject matter can be rendered aesthetically appealing to the point that a viewer may desire to own the paintings of these artists.

Bechtle's paintings may also offer social commentary but this commentary remains somewhat ambiguous (as may also be the case in the works of all four artists looked at in this study). Joshua Shirkey maintains of Bechtle's paintings that, "Despite the plenitude of visual information they contain, they refuse to dictate social interpretation" (2005:136). Kuspit's somewhat more sobering view is that Photorealism, including the work of Bechtle, is a "subliminally biting if overtly dispassionate social realism" and "is a shockingly clinical description of the artificial environment in which we live", revealing the empty facades of standardised, trite and indifferent things (2009:n.pag.). Kuspit senses an alienation from these superficial surfaces, and feels Photorealistic paintings neglect to "reflect our organic and inner reality, except at odd unconvincing moments, superficially . . . we are invisible. When we are present, we lack substance and individuality; when we are absent the scene couldn't care less" (2007:n.pag.). The cars, empty streets and chairs Bechtle paints may be read as reflections of social alienation and anonymity, but can equally be seen as quiet and contemplative spaces; as personal spaces of melancholic longing.

The paintings of all three artists may simultaneously reveal multiple contradictory states: of superficial surfaces but also deeper hidden social and personal significance depending on each viewer's interpretation. A lack of people in many of Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my own paintings may not necessarily imply a complete resistance to the human form and social alienation. As shall be looked at shortly, Elkins (1996) maintains that the viewer constantly searches for bodies and the lack of bodies can be as significant as their presence.

Metaphors and contradictions: the commonplace made strange:

Photorealistic subject matter may seem obvious at first. In Van Zyl's *Arrival* (fig 2), it may simply be a hospital bed, Bechtle's *20th and Texas, Early Evening* (fig 39) may simply be about a car and a tree on a street corner and my *Two Chairs* (fig 31) may be about two chairs. However, even the simplest denotative image offers multiple connotations. "For Barthes, the photograph always oscillates between the naturalized image and the ideological sign, the denoted and the connoted message" (Kriebel 2007:15).

Ludwig Wittgenstein maintains: "A repetition makes a theme appear in quite a different light" (1980:98). The banal subject matter chosen and photographed potentially becomes strange when painted and contemplated as a painting. Milan Kundera maintains that one of the purposes of the novel (and this can similarly apply to photorealism in painting) is "to question the commonplace, make it seem surprising, enigmatic: 'It doesn't just represent situations – jealousy,

say, or tenderness or the taste for power – it arrests them, asks questions of them, understands them as enigmas'" (in Tallis 1988:19). Furthermore, Kundera says:

Take jealousy, for example. It is so commonplace as to make any explanation seem unnecessary. But if you begin to pause and think about it, it is different...Suddenly the commonplace becomes difficult, troubling, enigmatic. (in Tallis 1988:19).

The same may be true of commonplace objects: when represented in paint they become sites for contemplation. Seemingly simple forms in representational painting can be deeply symbolic. Andries Gouws maintains that "everyday objects become transfigured when looked at closely" (2006:1). In painting ordinary objects and places, a painting can arrest one's attention and demand the viewer look in a different way. Irwin Panofsky maintains that a seemingly simple form in a painting "impresses the beholder with a kind of mystery and makes him inclined to suspect a hidden significance in all and every object" (in Maré 1998:11).

For Elkins this hidden significance relates to what is closest to the viewer's experience of the world: the human body. Elkins suggests that when objects are seen, viewers try to see bodies in them or to somehow relate them to the body:

It may be that the unthinking search for bodies is the most fundamental operation of vision and that when there are no bodies present, we continue to understand the world in terms of bodily forms, textures, or metaphors. (Elkins 1996:12-13).⁷³

When we are confronted by an unfamiliar object – a blot, a funny smear, a strange configuration of paint, a mirage, a frightening apparition, a wild landscape, a brass microscope, a building made of brick and rock – we seek a body in it; we try to see something like ourselves, a reflection or an other, a doppelganger or a twin, or even just a part of us – a face, a hand or a foot, an eye, even a hair or a scrap of tissue In other words, we try to understand strange forms by thinking back to our bodies. (Elkins 1996:129).

Elkins maintains: "Pictures of the body elicit thoughts about the body, and they can also provoke physical reactions in my body" (1996:138). He concurs with Robert Vischer's idea that pictures can convey feelings without requiring language as an intermediary (Elkins 1996:138). Pictures of an absence of the body may then also elicit thought about the absence of the body.

By painting places and objects typically designed for human use, the paintings of all three artists under discussion refer to the human body. The viewer imagines how a body might relate to and use the spaces and objects depicted. This view is evident in Melvyn Minnaar's comments about my paintings, already mentioned in Chapter One: "Although vacant, all the spaces speak of

⁷³ Elkins further maintains that this process is largely unconscious: "My seeing is heavily dependent on my various conceptions of the body and its parts: its weights and heights, its inside and outside, its limbs and head, its many metaphors. But all of this is uncognized. Bodies are woven so deeply and tightly into our thought that we have to work to see how little we would understand without them" (1996:159).

human endeavour” (2010:12). Bechtle’s paintings are equally metaphoric as “Cars function as surrogates for living creatures in Bechtle’s painting, sometimes menacingly, sometimes humorously” (Kalina 2005:134). “While cars reflect the humans that own them, so does furniture, especially that analogue to the human seated form, the chair” (Kalina 2005:134). Chairs feature in the paintings of all three artists and seem to become metaphors for both human presence and absence. Chairs are featured in Bechtle's *Watsonville Chairs* (fig 46) and *Santa Barbara Chairs* (fig 47), Van Zyl's *Hospital Diptych 1 - The Waiting Room* (fig 36) and *Waiting Room* (fig 27), and in my *Two Chairs* (fig 37) and *Hospital 2* (fig 29).

A chair is made to accommodate standard dimensions of the human body and so heavily implies human presence without having to include the human form. A chair hints at the lack of a person but it also becomes a metaphor for a person waiting, for absence and presence. Bechtle's assortment of homely chairs in *Watsonville Chairs* (fig 46) and *Santa Barbara Chairs* (fig 47) refer to a more personal absence. Each chair is different, individual and seems to thus become substitute portraits for specific absent people. In Van Zyl's *Hospital Diptych 1 - The Waiting Room* (fig 36), *Waiting Room* (fig 27), my *Two Chairs* (fig 37) and *Hospital 2* (fig 29) the chairs seem to imply a more anonymous and alienated reference as if whoever is absent is lost among the clinical repetition of identical chairs. The painted chair may be an invitation for a seat to be filled, the trace of a human presence remembered or, to borrow from Van Robbroeck's essay, a 'Memento Mori' for someone passed.

The suggestion of human presence indicated by the empty chair encourages the viewer to wonder about the events just past or events to come. Every built structure in these paintings accommodates human comings and goings and periods of waiting. The spaces are urban and built and for human use but exist in a moment of stasis. The props of everyday life such as cars and chairs are objects closely associated with human interactions and so it is easy for the viewer to associate them with human behaviour. In the still spaces depicted in my paintings, implied action is evident:

Whether abandoned, just vacated or soon to be filled up, they seem, ironically, to ooze an urgency of action. Something is happening here, despite all the quietness, regardless of the air of melancholy. And thus we place our own narratives within those spaces. (Minnaar 2010:12).

In this way, these paintings are open to multiple interpretations because they may suggest without dictating human action and narrative.

“Bechtle has often spoken of the ‘dumbness’ of his car paintings; the images seem so everyday as to be meaningless. Yet they are anything but ordinary ‘snapshots’” (SFMOMA: Robert Bechtle 1998-2010:n.pag.). The stationary car becomes symbolically strange: “Its isolation lends an uneasiness to the scene: if automobiles exist to move people, then this car's utter stillness emphasizes the absence of passengers” (SFMOMA: Robert Bechtle 1998-2010:n.pag.). An operation table lamp in Van Zyl's *Operating Theatre 1* (fig 38) becomes a looming and probing eye, a dissecting gaze cast upon the vulnerable and fragile patient. Van Robbroeck sees that, “The 'bed' in the surgery is far less bed than space-ship or instrument of torture, the theatre light a cluster of glaring and menacing eyes - a composite eye, as alien as the eye of a spider” (2007:56).

Van Zyl's Hospital series is more a series of "startlingly present moments", "ringing with the silence of utter abandonment" than continuous narratives and stories (Van Robbroeck 2007:50).

The paintings of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself become suggestive fragments as the cropped scene may indicate but never reveal what is 'around the corner', 'down the street' or 'down the passage'. In this way, these paintings suggest an endless narrative and yet remain fiercely resistant in offering so little information. A continuous dialogue, both articulate and wordless, may be set into motion between painting and viewer.

Titles in Bechtle, Van Zyl and my own work are equally resistant to explanations. Titles such as *Santa Barbara Chairs*, *Texas Street Intersection*, *Two Chairs*, *Hospital 1 and 2* and *Operating Theatre 1 and 2* are largely denotative. Other titles such as *Currents*, *Recovery Room* and *Arrival* hint at something other than what is literally seen and so encourage further reading in a narrative sense. The seeming neutrality of these titles also allows the viewer to easily 'adopt' the scene as their own; assimilating it into their imagined experience of chairs, hospitals and streets. Bechtle's title *Santa Barbara Chairs* (fig 47) curiously directs the viewer's attention to the empty chairs and not what would seem to be the focus of the painting: the seated man, probably the artist himself, half in the shadows. This creates a further sense of anonymity and distance, as if the man is invisible with the lack of company to fill the rest of the individual looking chairs. The man faces the viewer but his dark glasses and face heavily cast in shadow obscure his identity. This sense of distance and anonymity in Bechtle's work, ironically, may make it easier for a viewer to relate to the depicted scene. Shirkey notices this when he says:

In the majority of his works the figures go unnamed, but, by so closely imitating family snapshots, he enables viewers (or more accurately, American viewers of a specific age, race, and class) to read these individuals as recognisable types: mother, wife, sister-in-law. (2005:99).

The seated man in *Watsonville Chairs* (fig 46) is equally unengaged and distant and seems as if cut off from the scene as his body is cropped and he faces away to the right, occupied with some other task, conversation or thought. The lone figure in my *Passages* (fig 23) is similarly detached from the viewer as his face and body posture is turned away, creating a sense of distance and anonymity.

Van Zyl mentions how a painting is read very differently when there is a figure in it because all the focus, it seems is on a narrative centred on the figure (in Wouldidge 2000:44-45). Elkins' (1996) search for bodies, it seems, becomes fixated on them when found. Van Zyl states:

The moment you introduce a figure into a painting the whole dynamic changes. People react differently to a painting that has a person in it; we immediately focus on the figure and begin to weave a story around that person. This can often detract from a painting. Should you have two figures in a painting, another dynamic arises where the viewer begins to weave a fantasy regarding the relationship between two people. (in Wouldidge 2000:44-45).

In all three painter's works, there seems to be a poised tension; an underlying drama or a quiet turmoil beneath the still pools of reflected light in each. This effect is perhaps due to the relative normality and everyday nature of the scenes depicted and the lack of human subjects literally narrating the scene. Narratives are barely hinted at in each artist's work and the multiple layers of contradictory states in these paintings compel the viewer to wonder.

Van der Merwe sees contradictory states brought together in my paintings: "Photographic fidelity is constantly disrupted by irrational space, light and colour, rendered so convincingly that we are unable to distinguish between the two worlds" (2009:3). Paintings such as *Passages* (fig 23) may seem so real and yet would be impossible structures in real life. The viewer is both drawn to and repelled from the painted surface and what is pictured within it.

The familiarity of these spaces render them almost archetypal as if we've known such places, and yet the deconstruction of architectural and constructional logic, sometimes subtly and sometimes obviously, makes these places unreasonable and uninhabitable - the kind of spaces we can only imagine or experience in dreams. And yet the attention to detail, texture, reflection, colour, light, shadow and spatial aesthetics leaves us completely convinced as to the intense reality of these spaces. (Van der Merwe 2010:3).

The contradictory state of the photographic instant captured in paint is further heightened by ambiguous subject matter. Hospital rooms, passages of public buildings and suburban streets are all spaces of transition, these are not places to linger and yet fixed eternally in paint the transient space becomes one of fixed contemplation. For a moment, the viewer may linger in the surfaces bathed in light, all the while sensing that this too shall pass. These spaces may be seen as metaphorical thresholds between states of being: of life and death, of origin and destination, real and unreal, belonging and alienation.

A search for the comfort of home is not found in any of these paintings. In Bechtle's paintings, the viewer passes by, shut out, wandering the streets (see figs 31, 39, 40 and 41). In Van Zyl's hospital paintings, the bare cold functionality of chairs, beds and walls, typical items found in the home, seem paradoxically uninviting (see figs 27, 35, 36 and 38). My paintings similarly depict bare and uninviting interiors (see figs 25, 28, 29 and 32 especially).

Van Zyl's paintings have a further gravitas not evident in Bechtle's or my own paintings due to his specific subject matter having personal meaning for him as a terminal patient. In Van Zyl's paintings, contradictory states are brought together: "The ephemeral and the transient is a continuous thread" and "The discrepancy between the enormity of life and death, and the banality of the surroundings in which these momentous events take place, is the topic of not only *Hospitaaltyd*, but much of Van Zyl's previous work" (Van Robbroeck 2007:54). Through the sombre gravitas of contemplating life and death in Van Zyl's paintings, Viljoen (2009) sees a glimmer of hope suggested. According to Viljoen, his paintings not only depict a search, a longing, or a,

Sehnsucht for the unattainable but the hope that what is longed for may be realized. Van Zyl spreads the rumour of hope. Hope of safety, home and health. Hope that there is

more. He poses the possibility of another world without undermining the present reality of this world. (2009:8).

The subject matter of all three artists is presented in a way that facilitates a silent dialogue between artwork and viewer. Banal subject matter has the potential to be stranger than a subject matter overtly trying to be dramatic and unusual. The lack of drama may have a valuable emotive function. Barthes says: "Ultimately, Photography [and I include photorealism here] is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks" (emphasis in original)(1981:58). The perceived strangeness may not be immediately apparent but rather emerges slowly and perhaps unconsciously: "Bechtle's paintings are damped down both emotionally and formally, and, while immediately comprehensible on one level, they tend to reveal themselves slowly, even a bit reluctantly" (Kalina 2005:136).

This section has aimed to show how reality is subtly and carefully negotiated in Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my own work. The exact subject matter chosen, although similarities may be seen, is quite specific in each artist's work and results in different individual visions, moods and social commentary. The use of photography to negotiate reality is vital in each painting. The photographic language of framing, cropping, light manipulations, collaging and juxtaposing, arranging flat shapes of tone and colour, the use of vertical and diagonal lines, the 'spatial squeeze' and the language of the snapshot; the unmediated feel of 'ordinary' photographs, is carefully and differently considered in each artist's work. Furthermore, this photographic language is contrasted with the transformation into a painted surface, the subtle presence of the artist's marks, exposed edges and hours of mindful application. All of these elements and negotiations of the real animate many tensions, make the commonplace strange and encourage sustained looking and wondering.

In the transformation from reality to photograph to paint, a visual but also a psychological shift occurs. The particular way in which the selected photorealist painters of this study employ these new methods enables a particular emotional impact, which will be looked at in the following section. A flux between belief and disbelief is set into motion, and the banal and empty subject matter depicted may become invested with something deeply strange, silent and potentially uncanny. The momentary suspension of disbelief may be essential in this process. The experience of the contradictory states embodied in each of the above-mentioned paintings may bring about various emotional responses in the viewer. Even though an emotional response may be one of the most difficult states to adequately explain, numerous attempts have been made. These explanations in emotive response theories as offered by Barthes (1981), Elkins (1996; 2001), Phillip Shaw (2006), Burke (1990), Kant (1952) and others are offered in the following section as approaches to understanding and sharing what may be unique or universal experiences.

4.3. Painting and emotive response

The use of photographs in mediating reality allows artists to transform and translate that reality in subtly nuanced ways. The visible evidence and some of the metaphorical evidence of this negotiation of the real has been looked at but, more importantly, it is because of this

transformation that photorealist paintings have the potential to emotionally affect the viewer. I have been drawn to and have ultimately chosen to study the works of Bechtle and Van Zyl for this very reason. Lyas maintains that "we are interested in far more than the looks and appearances of art" (1997:199). "We are also interested in how a work presents subject matter as a focus for thought and emotional attitude, distinctively fused to the imaginative exploration of material" (Eldridge 2003:190). This section focuses on some philosophical interactions with the 'painted real'. The results of the technological mediation utilised by Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself are seen in the paintings themselves, as has been said, but are also importantly to be found in the viewer's emotive response to these artworks.

The artist's meditative search for perfection:

The reasons why photorealist painters still desire to hand paint images may require further investigation. It has been seen that the ways in which technological mediation is used by Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself affects what each artist paints, but does not entirely explain *why* each artist paints. Gombrich points to the difficulty of theorising the painter's process because outsiders seldom see the artist's task. Gombrich notices that the artist "does not follow any fixed rules. He just feels his way" (1950:31).⁷⁴

Eloquent theories for unpacking and understanding art seem to always come after the painting has been made. The artist may not seem to approach a canvas intending to paint simulacras that deconstruct notions of reality in a disinterested way that comment on technology and consumerism because painting is not always a rational and measurable process. Van Zyl notices this difficulty in his painting process: "For me it's about trying to capture an atmosphere. It's so difficult to describe what it is that I see, and want to capture on canvas. That's the reason I'm an artist and not a writer" (in Woulidge 2000:45). The process of painting and the decisions involved are mostly non-verbal. Kant maintains that the successful artist,

cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings its product into being . . . [T]he author of a product that he owes to his genius does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to plan, and to communicate to others precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar works. (Kant 2000:187).

Kant has a rather romantic view of the creatively inspired artist. Parts of his view are questionable because an artist may be able to explain a great deal of the painting process and may extensively plan paintings. What Kant seems to be aiming at is that there may be significant parts of the process that an artist is unable to communicate effectively. It may be difficult to rationalise and articulate the actions of the artist's body and thought processes when painting. In the act of painting, "Those ideas . . . that we outsiders usually worry about, ideas about beauty

⁷⁴ Gombrich often reveals his gender bias through his consistent reference to the artist as male. For my purposes, I extend his comments to include female artists, like myself.

and expression, are rarely mentioned by artists" (Gombrich 1950:28-29). Artists may struggle to verbalise their process but are not necessarily entirely mute on the subject.

In my own experience, the process of painting seems to bring an inanimate surface (that of the photograph and more directly, the blank painting support) to life. Each layer of paint is an attempt at a kind of perfection, and perhaps attaining beauty, to match and go beyond a mood and atmosphere recognised in the selection of the photograph that I responded to in the first place. The smoothing out of brush strokes in *Two Chairs* (fig 37), as in all my paintings, is integral to the seamless mood, atmosphere and sense of visual perfection created. Each tonal mark is delicately held together to form a whole. Creative decisions are invariably influenced by many factors including aesthetic conventions and ideological strategies and these influences may not be entirely apparent to the artist. A sense of perfection may mean many things, it may simply be in copying the photograph as closely as possible, it may be in finding a particularly appealing composition, but it could also be in some indescribable and subjective sense that every component in and of the painting resonates together and just 'feels right'.

It is the *process* of painting that, as an artist, I find most rewarding. Photography, although essential in the photorealist's process, is only a mediator, an aid. In my experience, photography alone does not provide the satisfaction gained from painting the image and viewing the final painting. Michael Auping stresses the importance of the painted medium in Bechtle's work: "Bechtle's images could not exist as photographs. Their information is too slow, their nuances far more laboured. Nor could their story be told through film" (2005:44).

It may be that through the technological mediation of the camera an artist has the ability to see something extraordinary in the ordinary and to transform it through paint. It seems that it would occur to few people to select and make a painting of an ordinary and somewhat unattractive hospital bed as Van Zyl has done in *Arrival* (fig 2), and yet by painting the photographic image, he manages to embody an intense and quiet atmosphere that makes an ordinary bed deeply symbolic and strangely beautiful.⁷⁵ For some artists, painting may be a kind of meditative and therapeutic contemplation. Van Zyl mentions that he does what he loves, what makes him happy and he tries "to capture the spiritual dimension of generations of inhabitants, the whispering of that which happened in the past" (Woulidge 2000:43). Furthermore, he says: "It's about arriving at a place and experiencing a certain déjà vu, an instinctive knowing that there is something special about the place" (Woulidge 2000:45). Here the unfamiliar may seem strangely familiar or uncanny⁷⁶ and may equally be felt by the artist and viewer alike.

⁷⁵ Statements such as this one are not intended to form a hierarchical relationship with photography. I do not aim to deny the fact that many photographs can be emotively powerful, meaningful and beautiful on their own without being painted, however, painting the photograph does transform the image into something else, it works differently and this is what I hope to stress.

⁷⁶ Like 'reality' and the 'sublime', the term 'uncanny' is also historically loaded and is referred to without inverted commas for cosmetic reasons. The uncanny will shortly be looked at but, for my purposes I understand it to mean a feeling of simultaneous knowing and strangeness, familiarity and unfamiliarity.

For Bechtle (2005b) it seems the obsessive negotiation of each mark is important. In a 2005 interview for the *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*, Bechtle talks about his choice for painting from photographs rather than just exhibiting photographs:

it is because the painting process is so different, and it involves this very intense concentration about little decisions that are going on all the time. And my rather naive and romantic theory is that that intensity is very psychological and it gets embedded in the paint in a way that people looking at the painting - they don't know that it's there, but it affects how they read the painting. It's kind of part of the mystique of the painting, but I think part of the obsession of making the painting. (Bechtle 2005b:n.pag.).

Although it must be different for each artist, the negotiation of each mark may be a way of taking ownership of the photographic image and investing it with something personal. Jonathan Weinberg, in an essay about Bechtle's work, suggests that painting the photograph is a way of "possessing a photograph and the memories of people, places, and things that it ostensibly captures" (2005:60).

Apart from claiming a sense of ownership over the image, the satisfaction derived from painting may be in achieving a level of 'perfection'. Perfection here is a subjective term and the choice of subject matter, composition and painting technique is dependent on an artist's sensibilities. Gombrich maintains of the artist:

He has, on his canvas, perhaps hundreds of shades and forms which he must balance till they look 'right'. A patch of green may suddenly look too yellow because it was brought into too close proximity with a strong blue – he may feel that all is spoiled, that there is a jarring note in the picture and that he must begin it all over again. He may suffer agonies over this problem. He may ponder about it in sleepless nights; he may stand in front of his picture all day trying to add a touch of colour here or there and rubbing it out again, though you and I might not have noticed the difference either way. But once he has succeeded we all feel that he has achieved something to which nothing could be added, something which is just right – an example of perfection in our very imperfect world. (1950:30).

Painting can have deep significance for the painter as an act of meditation and as a search for perfection or 'rightness'.

What an artist worries about as he plans his pictures, makes his sketches, or wonders whether he has completed his canvas, is something much more difficult to put into words. Perhaps he would say he worries about whether he has got it 'right'. Now it is

only when we understand what he means by that modest little word 'right' that we begin to understand what artists are really after. (Gombrich 1950:28-29).⁷⁷

Tolstoy stresses how complex the work of embodying one's vision in a work is: musical execution is only then art, only then infects, when the sound is neither higher nor lower than it should be, when exactly the small centre of the required note is taken . . . The slightest deviation . . . destroys the perfection and consequently the infectiousness of the work . . . It is the same in all arts . . . Infection is only obtained when an artist finds those infinitely minute degrees of which a work of art consists. (Lyas 1997:64).

Lyas sees this as a situation where "there was nothing to be expressed that could be expressed equally well in any other way" (1997:64). Although the terms 'right' and 'perfection' are hard to qualify, they give an idea of the artist's personal search. For a photorealist artist, painting may be an obsession, a search for perfection, a creation of a particular atmosphere and an embedding of a psychological intensity. The residue of these processes seem to get deposited somewhere in the paint and can be felt by the viewer. Van Robbroeck reads an emotive intensity in Van Zyl's paintings:

these paintings, glazed with the unmistakable patina of hours and hours of meditative contemplation, become instruments of empathy and compassion. The unedifying space of the hospital becomes the subject of poetry as the artist infuses the gaze of the viewer with the hapless immobility and sporadic movement of the patient awaiting surgery. There is a last minute clinging to the material surface of things - the dull civil service-grey of a Formica covered wall, the cold glint of light on stainless steel - before the frightening plunge into the mysterious depths of surgical oblivion. The route from waiting room to ward to pre-surgery is transmuted, through the eyes of the artist/patient, into subtle and understated Stations of the Cross. (2007:49).

Van Zyl's *Arrival* (fig 2) becomes a site where the viewer can empathise with the plight of an invisible protagonist. The methods each artist employs to attain this sense of perfection are subtly different and the way the materials used are shaped and placed together holds the viewer's attention and invites contemplation and felt response.

Art is one of many phenomena that can arouse profound emotive responses and these phenomena along with their responses have been written about for centuries. For theorists such as Barthes (1981), Elkins (1996; 2001), Burke (1990), Philip Shaw (2006) and Kant (1952), attempting to explain and understand these emotive responses has been of great interest. For Burke (1776) and Kant (1952 (1790)) emotive responses are in an experience of the sublime, a term that has gained renewed attention.⁷⁸ For Freud (1919 (2001); 1955) paintings may have

⁷⁷ The term 'right' may mean many things. Gombrich seems to use the word in terms of the artist's specific intent. For me it is both in finding appropriate and appealing subject matter and compositions but also in achieving a high degree of technical fidelity to the appearance of the photograph, i.e. realistically 'right'.

⁷⁸ The term 'sublime' remains elusive because apart from spanning a history since first being presented by Longinus in the first century CE (Shaw 2006:4) up to the present, it is about explaining and defining an

something uncanny. For Barthes (1981), it is described as a 'puncturing' or '*punctum*'. For Elkins (2001) it is perhaps in the evidence that viewers have cried in front of paintings.

Exploring emotional responses to paintings is difficult due to the highly subjective nature of the experience and because these felt experiences do not lend themselves well to rational theoretical analysis. Each of these emotive explanations has potential flaws as they set out precisely to explain something that may defy explanation. However, emotive response theories are not intended as substitutes or equivalents for the emotional states they describe. Regardless of their potential problems, they still prove useful in better understanding painting's ability to affect the viewer emotionally. The rest of this chapter will explore some of these models further.

Understanding the emotive effects of paintings:

As mentioned in section 4.2, Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my own work seems to embody various contradictions, bringing them into a constant tension and play. Whether this is the tension between flat painting and illusion of space, the mechanically photographic and the manually painted, reality and artifice, objectivity and subjectivity, rational understanding and uncontrolled feeling, these tensions seem necessary to animate the particular allure and emotive potential in these paintings. Furthermore, as will be seen, these tensions facilitate the suspension of disbelief, the uncanny, an experience of the sublime, tears and experiencing the *punctum*. A common thread among the many theories about painting's ability to affect the viewer emotionally seems to be a bringing together of opposite and contradictory states or dealing with the boundary between them.

One such tension is laid out as follows. In Victor Burgin's view: "To look at a photograph for a while is to become frustrated", perhaps because "The look belongs to the camera" (1982:191). Photorealism can be similarly frustrating as the look of the painting belongs to the camera and the artist. Kriebel sees that "at first looking gives scopophilic pleasure then that pleasure is frustrated, because we still cannot access the reality that it represents" (Kriebel 2007:33). Furthermore, he maintains: "Instead, the beholder experiences a constant to-and-fro between authority over the image and alienation from that image, desire and disassociation, causing a disruption in the imaginary relationship with the visual field before us" (Kriebel 2007:33). In looking at a painting, meaning may fluctuate between denotative and connotative meaning. A viewer may see a painting such as *Two Chairs* (fig 37) for what it is, a painting on a wooden board of two chairs in a small room, and as a metaphor for alienation, the bare functionality of public buildings, meditative absence, loss and decay.

experience which cannot be grasped by the human intellect. This concept, and the difficulties associated with it are explored in Shaw's *The Sublime* (2006). While this is a good, although ambitious, historical account of the history of the sublime from its first use up until the present, Shaw fails to clarify the differing notions of the sublime and connect them in a more coherent manner. He concludes by suggesting a return to using the term 'beauty' but perhaps leaves the reader a little confused and in need of further substantiation.

The suspension of disbelief:

A constant 'to-and-fro' may also take place between belief and disbelief. Mary Jacobsen maintains that for the poet and aesthetic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "art does more than 'bring reality to mind'. . . art induces a state of mind in which readers (or viewers) temporarily do not care whether what they view is real or imagined" (1982:22). This state brings about "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge 1907: ch. xiv). The momentary 'suspension of disbelief', a term offered by Coleridge in 1817 (Jacobsen 1982:22), may be an important factor in the pleasurable experience received from looking at a photorealistic painting. For Norman Holland, the suspension of disbelief is about an intense *imaginative* involvement in an artwork '*as if*' it were real rather than in actually *believing* the illusion to be real (1968:64). In suspending disbelief when looking at art:

People get involved with entertainments in three closely related ways: they cease to pay attention to what is outside the work of art; they concentrate their attention wholly on it; then - and this is the special and important thing - they begin to lose track of the boundaries between themselves and the work of art. People get 'gathered up, carried along,' 'absorbed,' 'taken 'out' of themselves.' (Holland 1968:66).⁷⁹

The viewer may be aware that they are imagining and pretending that what they are looking at is real, but play along anyway, willingly blurring the boundaries between reality and artifice as they are seduced by the painted illusion. Photorealistic paintings are particularly good at allowing for this enjoyable suspension of disbelief to occur because they appear so real. Eldridge maintains that a work of art can *metaphorically* rather than descriptively be about the viewer (2003:196). In a moment, the viewer places themselves in the context as if they are the patient contemplating life and death and the hospital bed in Van Zyl's *Arrival* (fig 2). They may imagine they are caught in a still, dark landing punctured by a blinding light, noticing the glint of light on cold plastic chairs or the way the floor looks like water in my *Hospital 2* (fig 29). The viewer may imaginatively wander the streets of suburban San Francisco in bland late afternoon light, observing the cars parked in shadowy garages in Bechtle's *Sunset Garage* (fig 41).

As mentioned in the example of *Trompe l'oeil* paintings, it is equally important that the viewer also be aware of the illusion as a material object ('paint on canvas'), and that disbelief, at some point, is no longer suspended. *Arrival* (fig2), *Hospital 2* (fig 29) and *Sunset Garage* (fig 41) are not only seen as illusions, but also as arrangements of coloured pigment on flat canvas or wood displayed for viewing as artworks. Belief and disbelief vacillate back and forth and at times merge. It is important for the viewer to have the simultaneous experience of knowing and seeing the artifice of the constructed image; of knowing that it is a painting on a piece of board and yet at the same time being mesmerised by the believability of the depicted scene. Holland notices this in his experience of a performance in a theatre (this same experience could equally apply in viewing a photorealistic painting in a gallery):

⁷⁹ The 'works of art' Holland refers to here include certain plays, paintings, novels and even philosophical arguments (1968:65).

I find that as I watch an 'entertainment,' I am totally engrossed much of the time, but at various moments I become restless and aware of myself again, aware, perhaps, that I am sitting in a theatre, that there are people around me, that the theatre is overheated, and so on. Then, if I am enjoying the play or film, I lapse back and become absorbed in it again. (1968:84).

In forcing these oppositions very close, "What is 'out there' in the literary work feels as though it is 'in here' in your mind or mine" (Holland 1968:67). The act of copying in a photorealistic painting is not an attempt to deceive the viewer into actually believing the scene to be real, but to offer an imaginative experience that operates between reality and artifice. It is the particular feelings that arise from the suspension of disbelief that make this phenomenon relevant to photorealism.

The suspension of disbelief is similar to Walton's idea that the viewer can imagine or make-believe that a depicted scene or person is real, giving rise to feelings he calls 'quasi-emotions' (Walton 1990:251). For Walton, these emotions seem real but do not have the same consequences as real emotions (1990:251). The example Eldridge offers is "the felt quality of terror, say, but without the belief that anyone is in danger" (2003:191). It is "fictional that we feel sorrow or terror" (Walton 1990:256).⁸⁰ Walton refers to art forms such as fictional literature and film but photorealistic paintings similarly have fictional-seeming characters and scenarios. There are points of commonalities between art forms such as painting, fictional literature and film that emotively affect the viewer even though each may operate differently.

Eldridge asks however, why a viewer might care about something that does not exist and want to feel quasi-emotions about it (2003:192). In Walton's 'make-believe' argument the viewer only half-feels the melancholy and sadness of foreboding death and absence in Van Zyl's *Arrival* (fig 2) without the pain involved with the actual experience of these emotions. For Walton, in pretending to feel real emotions the viewer may gain a "deepened awareness of themselves and their situations" (Walton 1990:257). Similarly, Susan Feagin says: "One empathizes with a fictional character, whom I shall call the protagonist, when one 'shares' an emotion, feeling, desire, or mood of the character. The 'sharing' . . . is done through a simulation" (1996:81). In this way, a viewer or a reader may learn "what it is like" to be another person (Eldridge 2003:193-4) without the painful consequences. In the case of the photorealistic paintings looked at in this study, through the imaginative suspension of disbelief a viewer may pleausurably feel what it is like to be in another place.

Disinterestedness and distance:

Walton's use of imagination sets up a tension between perceived distances. In temporarily believing a painting to be real, the viewer can imagine themselves being placed within the scene. The scene becomes part of or close to the viewer. In this instance, the physical or material reality of the painting ('paint on canvas') is distanced or ignored. When disbelief is no longer suspended,

⁸⁰ Walton admits that these quasi-emotions occasionally give way to real emotions (Eldridge 2003:191).

the physical reality of the painting made apparent, and brought into 'touching distance' of the viewer. The depicted scene may then appear inaccessible, out of reach. This process constantly brings the near and the far, the accessible and the inaccessible together.

Kant (1952 (1790)) and Burke (1776) speak of a necessary distance set up between viewer and artwork in order to judge beauty. This necessary distance may be another vital part of how a painting can create an emotive response in the viewer. Holland (2008) partly links the suspension of disbelief to the disinterested way viewers attend to art when he says that to suspend disbelief:

involves a combination of psychological, neurological, and aesthetic moves. Aesthetically, we give up control to art. We become 'disinterested' in Kant's sense. We do not plan to act in relation to the literary work. Neurologically, because we do not plan to act on what we are paying attention to, our brain's reality-testing systems shut down. We don't doubt. Psychologically, mere comprehending entails belief. We experience 'anomalous suspense', believing, for the nonce, things that we know perfectly well are not true and could not be true. (Holland 2008:319).⁸¹

This necessary distance is referred to in many ways. Aristotle maintains that the task of artistic representations such as the tragic drama is the *catharsis* of emotions (1987:48). Eldridge explains this as follows:

To say that a successful tragic drama brings about the catharsis of emotions is to say that it makes clear the natures of the objects toward which emotions are appropriately felt: it presents the genuinely pitiable and fearful as pitiable and fearful. In doing so, it further engages and trains the emotions, so that the right emotion is felt toward the right object on the right occasion. (2003:42).

Furthermore, this catharsis is dependent on a set distance:

Sociologist Thomas Scheff (1979) writes that emotion, to be cathartic, must take place at the proper 'aesthetic distance,' where the experience of being a participant and observer is properly balanced. With too much distance, no emotion is felt. With too little, the experience is too painful to be cathartic. (in Nelson 2005:215-216).

Burke similarly comments on the importance of emotion being set at a distance in order to be enjoyed:

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful. (in Shaw 2006:54).

⁸¹ This statement seems to contradict Holland's earlier comment that suspension of disbelief involves an act of imagination rather than actual belief. However, the earlier comments were written over forty years ago and his more recent 2008 text seems to offer a deeper and more nuanced scientific study. For a detailed psychological and neuro-scientific study of the suspension of disbelief, see Holland's article: 'Spider-Man? Sure! The neuroscience of suspending disbelief' in the *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* (2008) Journal.

An apparently dim and even depressing hospital room such as the one in Van Zyl's *Arrival* (fig 2) may become 'delightful' by being photographed and painted because it is set at a certain distance away from reality.

Christian Helmut Wenzel maintains that in Kant's disinterested state, "I should be free of any kind of desire, aim or purpose, or any social, moral or intellectual considerations", and that for Kant this is the only way to judge something as beautiful in a "free and pure" way (2005:19). This disinterested way of looking creates a seemingly objective distance between the viewer and the artwork: "Being without interest requires a certain distance from the object as well as from oneself. One's satisfaction should not depend on considerations of the object in its social contexts, nor should it depend on one's personal needs and desires" (Wenzel 2005:21). Furthermore Kant maintains: "One must not be in the least biased in favour of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste" (in Wenzel 2005:21).⁸² A disinterested way of paying attention to art creates a sense of distance and requires the viewer not to see "any use of the object apprehended in any practical project. We do not undertake to build with beautiful paintings or poems or sunsets; we simply regard them" (Eldridge 2003:50).

Objective judgement in a disinterested way may not be entirely possible. Emotive responses are arguably tied to subjective judgements and so complicate matters. The viewer cannot divorce him or herself from pre-conceived ideas and feelings towards hospitals. Each new experience is always coloured by past experiences and so will always inform their judgements. Eldridge maintains that the specifically 'disinterested' way in which beauty is seen in art or nature, as laid out by Burke (1776) and Kant (1952 (1790)) among others, seems to be inadequate (2003:50). Imagining or temporarily believing the reality pictured and placing our own narratives within the painting seems to bring a closeness and subjectivity to the artwork that goes beyond simply 'regarding them'. Elkins also implies that that disinterested way of looking and judging is not possible when he says:

There is no looking that is not also directed at something, aimed at some purpose. Looking is looking *at* or *for* or just *away*. Everything that the eye falls on has some momentary interest and possible use. . . . I do not focus on anything that is not connected in some way with my own desires and actions. . . . My eyes can understand only desire and possession. Anything else is meaningless and therefore invisible. (emphasis in original)(1996:21-22).

It seems that the concept of disinterestedness highlights an important *part* of experiencing an artwork. A measure of distance is perhaps required for a viewer to judge a disturbing image as beautiful and moving but for Elkins this does not mean the viewer is separate and is not

⁸² For Kant, an interest (linked to desire) in an object may lead to a satisfaction in the morally good or the agreeable, but this judgement is not free and pure (in Wenzel 2005:21). "In both cases there is a desire, a consideration of aims and purposes, and an interest in the object's existence, which prevent the satisfaction from being free, pure, and self-contained (Wenzel 2005:21). For there to be satisfaction in the beautiful, however, the viewer must necessarily be free of desire and interest (Wenzel 2005:20).

interested in a metaphorical use of what is seen. In viewing Bechtle's *Six Houses on Mound Street* (fig 1), the viewer may desire to own the painting, may want to live in the houses pictured or experience walking past them with the sun on their face, seeing them as Bechtle does. Elkins seems to argue that it is not possible for the viewer to divorce themselves from these conscious and even subconscious desires. The viewer is then perhaps simultaneously distanced from the painting and the reality and objects pictured while also being intricately caught up in them.

The dead and the live:

The suspension of disbelief may take place on many metaphorical levels apart from just contrasting illusion and reality. One example Barthes refers to is in the comprehending of life and death in a photograph (1981:79). I extend this metaphor to photorealism because of photorealism's similar appearance to photography. As previously mentioned, the photograph may serve as an indexical document showing proof that something existed: "In photography, I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past" (emphasis in original)(Barthes 1981:80,76). In photography, and arguably in photorealism too because it so closely mimics the photograph, there is the bringing together of what Barthes refers to as the 'real', 'live' and 'death':

The photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead. (Barthes 1981:79).⁸³

Similarly, Badger maintains:

No matter how technically inept, how lacking in considered formal qualities, a photograph must always stop us short. For it brings us into direct [and temporal] contact with the past, and it transcends geographical boundaries. It puts us into immediate touch with the long ago and far away, with the quick and the dead. (2007:8).

Placing the live and the dead, the now and the past, in such close simultaneous proximity, the photograph touches two aspects potentially close to humanity: the very reality and immediacy of life and the impossibility of conceptualising death. Photographs, and by extension photorealistic paintings, become contradictions and impossibilities in pulling the boundaries of illusion and reality, life and death so close together. Again, the temporary suspension of disbelief is necessary here in creating a pleasurable experience as the viewer makes sense of these specific tensions.

⁸³ Moving pictures have a differing relationship to death than that of the still photograph. Kriebel asserts that "While film returns the dead to an appearance of life, restoring bodies into time, photography, by virtue of its stillness [Kriebel then quotes Metz] 'maintains the memory of the dead *as being dead*'" (2007:34)(emphasis in original). Christian Metz, in agreement with Barthes (1981), maintains that: "Immobility and silence are not only two objective aspects of death, they are also its main symbols, they *figure it*" (1985:83)(emphasis in original).

This tension between the dead and live has a further complexity in the photorealist painting: the tension between the inanimate, passive, 'dead' recording by the camera and the active, 'live' process of hand recording/creating, which is evident in a photorealistic painting.

The uncanny:

Further opposite states brought into simultaneous conflict in Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my own paintings are evident in that the subject matter is both familiar and unfamiliar, or what Freud (1955) might refer to as 'uncanny'. Freud (1919(2001)) defines the uncanny as something terrifying and simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar (1919(2001):220). He writes,

if psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny. . . . if this is indeed the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why linguistic usage has extended das Heimliche ['homely'] into its opposite, das Unheimliche; for this uncanny in reality is nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (Freud 1919 (2001):241).

Among the three artists looked at in this chapter, Bechtle's paintings seem to offer the most seemingly ordinary subject matter. However, all three painters select quite ordinary subject matter and even though hospitals are perhaps less common in everyday experiences, most western middle-class painting-viewers are familiar with them. In Weinberg's interpretation of Freud's uncanny, he says: "For Freud, what is uncanny is not just the grotesque or unusual; the uncanny may also be found in a new apprehension of everyday phenomena and objects" (Weinberg 2005:58). By photographing and painting ordinary subject matter, it is apprehended in a new way and is thus rendered strange.

Common to each, but more evident in my own work and that of Bechtle, is the strangeness and difficulty in comprehending a painting that does not look like a painting but more like a photograph. The photograph becomes strange by not being a photograph. The feeling of the uncanny occurs in subtly different ways in each artist's paintings and the differences can be seen more clearly in the particular subject matter of each. All three artists paint various archetypal and familiar architectural structures designed for human use, but because they are largely devoid of the comforts of home, they seem strangely unfamiliar.

In Bechtle's paintings, "The uncanny sensation that such paintings evoke is deeply rooted in the process whereby the home is made strange through the imitation of photographs" (Weinberg 2005:59). Bechtle paints homes but they are surface exterior veneers; the viewer is denied access both visually and physically, rendering them distant, alien, strange and uncanny.

Both Freud (1955:366) and Julia Kristeva maintain that uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased (1991:187), which is a subject already looked at in the suspension of disbelief. For Freud,

an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effected, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes and so on. (1955: 366).

This is where photorealist paintings, in appearing so very real and allowing occasion for the suspension of disbelief, may be particularly uncanny. The boundaries between imagination and reality in a painting such as *Passages* (fig 23) are unclear for another reason. The image appears seamless as if it could exist in reality and yet something else is not right. In being composed of multiple spaces, the image pictures a space that would be impossible in reality. Floor levels and vanishing points in *Passages* (fig 23) do not match up and the doorway to the left centre seems illogical in how it faces diagonally to the passageway next to it. Van der Merwe sees that in my paintings there is a:

shift between representing universally recognisable places and the uncanny deconstruction thereof. . . . The familiarity of these spaces render them almost archetypal as if we've all known such places, and yet the deconstruction of architectural and constructional logic . . . makes these places unreasonable and uninhabitable - the kind of spaces we can only imagine or experience in dreams. (2010:2-3).

My paintings may then seem to be particularly uncanny in the way familiar-type structures are combined to create unfamiliar and impossible structures.

The uncanny operates slightly differently in Van Zyl's paintings. Nathan Carlin suggests that:

Hospitals are inherently uncanny places, places where we can imagine ourselves at any moment. And the homelike hospital room, while made to look familiar and safe, is still always potentially a place of terror, a place of deaths past and deaths to come, and a place where one's own body parts could easily be severed, and so the homelike hospital room has certain affinities to the uncanny severed hand: both are familiar, strange, and terrifying. (2009:31).

In this way, Carlin believes that "Homelike hospital rooms fit Freud's definition of the uncanny in that they are familiar, strange, and terrifying" (2009:28). Van Zyl's paintings may then be uncanny in their lack of the representation of home comforts and in the implied fear of pain and death associated with hospitals. This may also be evident in my paintings, but to a lesser degree because I do not paint hospital rooms, but rather the passages. Each artist's subject matter may also be uncanny because streets, public buildings and hospital rooms may be seen as thresholds or boundaries between the private and the public, the accessible and inaccessible, the self and the other and thus the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The uncanny is a specific kind of contradictory experience. The viewer may sense a *déjà vu* and recognition in looking at Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my paintings and yet these depicted spaces are unknown. It is the impossibility of reconciling these contradictory states that a viewer may find enjoyable. The painting is never entirely comprehended but the viewer keeps trying, keeps looking.

Barthes' *punctum*:

The paintings of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself seem to all have uncanny elements, but this does not fully explain a viewer's emotive responses to them. In addition to the tension between familiar and unfamiliar elements encapsulated by Freud's uncanny, these paintings may have an acutely direct emotional impact similar to the effect specific photographs can have on a viewer, which Barthes (1981) calls the '*punctum*'.

Barthes distinguishes between the '*studium*' as a general liking or interest in a photographic scene and the '*punctum*' or 'puncture' as an "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (1981:26-27). In his personal way of describing his emotive response, the *punctum* as an attraction is "something more like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labour too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken" (1981:19). As a viewer emotionally effected by an image, Barthes struggles to verbalise and locate what it is that causes this reaction in him. "What I can name cannot really prick me" (Barthes 1981:51), but he says:

The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance. Mapplethorpe has photographed Robert Wilson and Philip Glass. Wilson *holds* me, though I cannot say why, i.e., say *where*: is it the eyes, the skin, the position of the hands, the track shoes? The effect is certain but unlocatable, it does not find its sign, its name; it is sharp and yet lands in the vague zone of myself; it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash. (emphasis in original)(Barthes 1981:51-53).

Kriebel notes that "Importantly, the *punctum*, which disturbs the *studium*, is private and personal" (2007:20), but at the same time Michaels maintains that the *punctum* can be shared with millions (2007:439). In one of Barthes' descriptions of a photograph of a boy who looked at Napoleon, Michaels says: "You do not have to be Barthes, you do not even have to be French, to feel the prick of Napoleon's mortality" (2007:439). Essentially, in *Camera Lucida* (1981) Barthes is alerting the reader to the fact that an image has affected him in some direct and piercing way he cannot adequately describe but nonetheless feels the need to acknowledge and share with others. Photorealistic painting might similarly affect a viewer in this direct and piercing way, as a kind of 'shock' while still being haunted in a more indirect way by the uncanny.

The sublime:

The concept of the sublime, first presented by Longinus in the first century CE (Shaw 2006:4) and rediscovered in the eighteenth century, is closely associated with overwhelming emotion and so may offer further clarity on the potential emotive effects of photorealistic paintings. Both Bechtle and Van Zyl's paintings have been referred to as offering sublime experience. Glen Hefland describes Bechtle's command of darkness in a painting as sublime (2003:n.pag.) and Viljoen finds that Van Zyl's work communicates a "sublime longing through an almost obsessive documentation of material reality" (2009:8). Similarly, Vermeer's paintings are repeatedly referred to as sublime, by Sontag (1994), Tilden (2001), Pollock (in White & Pajaczowska 2009) and Schopenhauer (in Samuel 2002-10) among *many* others. Jane Forsey highlights that over the last decade there has been increasing attention given to the aesthetic notion of the sublime

(2007:381). It has become a commonplace term but little clarity exists as to what it really means to call something sublime.

The sublime is particularly difficult to define because, apart from spanning a vast history, it is about the experience of something greater than can be grasped; an awareness of an experience beyond the faculties of reason and human intellect. It remains problematic because attempts at definitions seem to defy what the sublime is about: an experience that essentially evades definition. For Shaw, the sublime refers to precisely "the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language" (Shaw 2006:3).

Although inherently beyond words and therefore difficult to theorise, many have attempted a verbal formulation. It is useful to look at some of these diverging ideas to clarify what I mean by the term and to see if it may apply to the works of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself.⁸⁴

The Oxford Dictionary of Art (1997:543, s.v. 'sublime') is vague in its definition of the sublime, distinguishing it from the beautiful or picturesque and connecting it to feelings of "awe and vastness" in an aesthetic experience of vast natural forms.⁸⁵ Shaw offers a more useful overview of the term:

In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then* we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits. (emphasis in original)(Shaw 2006:2).

An experience of the sublime may be a recognition of the inability to bring together the array of contradictory states embodied in a painting. Throughout this study, I have argued that the selected works of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself bring many contradictory and opposite states together. In so doing they seem to facilitate the sublime experience Shaw describes.

Adam Phillips notes how for Burke the sublime involves both pleasure and pain but is principally ruled by the emotion of terror (Burke 1990:xxi). For Burke, the "source of the sublime" is "whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (Burke 1990:36). As has been seen, hospital rooms in Van Zyl's paintings may evoke feelings of terror in that they are places that signify malady and potential death. The concept of terror seems less evident in the work of Bechtle and myself.

⁸⁴ At the same time, Forsey notes that although the term is popular, she questions the possibility of a theory of the sublime at all since it is about the inexplicable (2007:381). Similarly, Elkins points out that although the sublime "is part of the current critical vocabulary" or "in the lexicon of contemporary art discourse", it may not be particularly useful (2009:10). This idea will be explored shortly but first it is necessary to explore some of the basic ideas around what the sublime is.

⁸⁵ As one of the key philosophers associated with ideas on the sublime, Kant is not mentioned at all in this definition.

In contrast to his predecessors who saw God as an authenticator of the sublime, Burke maintains that the sublime is experienced through the human senses as a mental state (in Shaw 2006:49). Burke maintains that as terror (or fear) is a kind of passion that "robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning" the sublime experience thus resists knowledge, philosophical enquiry and categorisation (Burke 1990:xxi-xxii). Burke would arguably not have found photorealism to offer a sublime experience because: "To make anything very terrible, obscurity *in general* seems to be necessary" (own emphasis)(Burke 1990:54). A photorealistic painting is both obvious or clear in its visual clarity and obscure in its singular viewpoint and philosophical interpretations, not obscure *in general*.

If I make a drawing of a palace, or a temple, or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then . . . my picture can at most affect only as a palace, temple, or landscape would have affected in the reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting. (emphasis in original)(Burke 1990:55).

It seems that a literal naturalistic image would not evoke a feeling of the sublime for Burke, who has a clear bias towards language as a stronger emotive communicator. In his argument, it seems a painting of a chair would have the same effect on the viewer as seeing an actual chair. However, paintings of literal objects such as those of Bechtle, Van Zyl's, and myself, as has been seen, are by no means purely literal. As metaphors and because they carry the stamp of photographic 'authenticity', they evoke many obscure notions such as ideas of death (Barthes 1981), life and the questioning of the nature of reality. In this sense, they could arguably affect the emotions in terms of the Burkian sublime.⁸⁶

Simply put, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1952:94), Kant maintains that the "*Sublime* is the name given to what is *absolutely great*"(emphasis in original) (1952:94). Shaw adds that when faced "with a seemingly endless sequence of sensible intuitions, the imagination is overcome by the impossibility of ever accounting for the sequence in its entirety" (2006:81). The multiple contradictory states inherent in photorealist painting, such as the tension between reality and illusion, painting and photograph, the live and the dead, the familiar and the unfamiliar, are sequences of opposites that are impossible to reconcile and therefore offer an occasion for sublime experience.

Another notion central to Kant's sublime is the tension between boundaries. In some interpretations, it becomes difficult to speak of photorealistic paintings as sublime because for Kant, the sublime, unlike the beautiful, is "to be found in a formless object . . . while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality" (1987:98). "The sublime, in other words, refers to things which appear either formless (a storm at sea; a vast mountain range) or which have form,

⁸⁶ Both Burke and Kant's notions of the sublime are highly gendered, privileging the deep, understanding, masculine sublime over the shallow, feminine counter-spirit of beauty (in Shaw 2006:56,67,143) and so these gender issues further complicate the use of the term.

but for reasons of size, exceed our ability to perceive such form" (Shaw 2006:78). It is typically the vast in natural forms that is seen to elicit the sublime in the mind (Shaw 2006:82). The photorealistic painting seems to have clear form and boundaries, is not a natural form and in Kant's terms would arguably not elicit sublime thoughts.

However, some aspects of a photorealistic painting could be seen as unbounded even though it has a fixed physical form. The comprehension of the live and the dead and of the many levels of reality and artifice at play in these works is not clear and therefore open to much interpretation. When Shaw states that for Kant, sublimity "resides in the human capacity to think beyond the bounds of the given" (2006:83), then the bounded painting seen as multiple metaphors becomes unbounded in its interpretations, and could therefore offer a sublime experience.

Important to Kant's ideas is the notion that the sublime is not found in final and concrete things, as is the case with the beautiful, but is more a faculty of the mind found "only in our own ideas" (1952:97) and "involves no more than the development of a final employment by the imagination of its own representation" (1952:93).⁸⁷ In his definition: "*The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense*" (emphasis in original)(1952:98). By only being in the mind, judgements of taste are arguably severely subjective, based on personal taste and so cannot be validated rendering them of little use.

This difficulty is overcome for Kant because sublime presentations in the mind and thus judgements of taste "function *as if* they were statements of fact", offering an ideal standard and are seen as universally valid based on an assumption that others will agree (emphasis in original)(Shaw 2006:76-77). If the sublime is about that which cannot be grasped, that which is beyond human reasoning, then it seems ironic to be able to write about it at all. Kant's writings alone seem to elicit sublime thoughts in the reader as they struggle to create clarity. "The sublime, in the proper meaning of the term", writes Kant, "cannot be contained in any sensible form" (in Shaw 2006:80).

In postmodern interpretations of the sublime, Žižek maintains that "in art the spiritual and material spheres are intertwined: the spiritual emerges when we become aware of the material inertia, the dysfunctional bare presence, of the objects around us" (2003:13-14). Shaw cites an example that in an object's detachment from its context, "the image becomes invested with significance beyond its 'dysfunctional bare presence' " (2006:4). A simple pair of broken chairs in *Two Chairs* (fig 37) are not only seen as objects, but also become symbolic of human absence, presence, neglect, abandonment and waiting. In this interpretation, the sublime has a connection to the commonplace made strange discussed in the previous chapter, to Freud's

⁸⁷ Furthermore, Kant maintains that it may be inaccurate to call an "*Object of nature*" sublime (1952: 91-92). He maintains: "All that we can say is that the object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind. For the sublime, in the strictest sense of the word cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation" (1952: 91-92).

(1955) uncanny and to Barthes' (1981) *punctum* as an ordinary-seeming image has some extraordinary significance and effect. In this version of the sublime, "the sublime experience points no longer to an object *beyond* reason and expression, but rather to 'that within representation which nonetheless exceeds the possibility of representation'" (emphasis in original)(Milbank cited in Shaw 2006:4).

For theorists such as Elkins (2009), Žižek (in Shaw 2006), Shaw (2006) and Forsey (2007), the sublime is simply too problematic to be useful. Forsey maintains that most theories of the sublime are either too inclusive or exclusive in their conditions to be of great use (2007:388). The sublime:

cannot be an object of experience, but neither can it be a description of the cognitive failure of a given subject. If it is to deal with only some feeling or emotive state, it devolves into no theory whatsoever. In the one interpretation, the sublime can be nothing; in the second, anything; and in the third, it cannot be theorized at all. (Forsey 2007:388).

Shaw notes that "much contemporary art plays on the idea that anything, even excrement can serve as an indicator of the sublime" and, "As Žižek observes, contemporary art is painfully aware that the distinction between the sublime and the ridiculous is a matter of degree" (2006:142). Elkins quotes Richard Rorty's comments that the sublime is "wildly irrelevant to the attempt at communicative consensus which is the vital force" of common culture (in Elkins 2009:24). Forsey ultimately claims: "we must conclude that a theory of the sublime such as we have historically striven for is simply out of reach" (Forsey 2007:388).

Elkins argues that using the concept of the sublime today is inadequate because it is too bound to its Romantic history, to religion and is too complicated and unresolved in its definition that it has become an entirely useless term (Elkins 2009:1). For Shaw, the concept of the sublime is also too contradictory and in the case of the Kantian and Hegelian sublime it becomes divorced from the particular object of its desire rendering it too abstract, cold, and in some ways empty (2006:151). Shaw suggests a return to using the term 'beauty' over the 'sublime' (2006:148).

As has been seen, the sublime may be useful as a term in a general sense but as soon as clarity is sought, it becomes highly problematic. I believe however, that the sublime does not have to be a perfect theory to be useful. The sublime is found in contradictions, in a struggle for meaning, in trying to give form to the formless or to express the inexpressible. The concept of the sublime highlights the difficulty but also the pleasure felt in experiencing entirely contradictory states and for this reason it is useful. Although this state can never adequately be described, it hints at the emotive power a photorealistic painting can have.

Tears:

Although Elkins feels various synonyms would be more adequate to express what is meant by the sublime he is not forthcoming in suggestions (2009: 1).⁸⁸ A likely synonym in Elkin's terms, may be in bringing the viewer to tears. He says:

But paintings can also work differently, in a way that isn't easy to put into words, that slides in and out of awareness, that seems to work upward toward the head from somewhere down below: a way that changes the temperature of your thinking instead of altering what you say. That other kind of experience can tunnel into your thoughts and bring tears to your eyes. (Elkins 2001:x).

This statement suggests that evidence of an emotive response to painting may be found in a painting's ability to bring the viewer to tears. Some comments left behind in the guest book at the Mark Rothko Chapel in Houston read: "Was moved to tears, but feel like some change in a good direction will happen", "Thank you for creating a place for my heart to cry", and "Tears, a liquid embrace" (Elkins 2001:11). Crying in front of a painting seems to bring a sense of closeness and healing and in this way is a valuable experience. Judith Kay Nelson suggests that: "The visual arts also have a direct relationship to crying, in part because they appeal to the eye and because they are silent like weeping" (2005:211). In Elkins' experience of almost crying in front of Giovanni Bellini's *Ecstasy of St. Francis*, he says the painting "was a kind of bible without words: it taught me to find meaning in the smallest scrap on the floor, or the dulllest glint from a nameless stone" and connects him to "an entire world where every twig and thorn has its measure of holiness" (2001:84,83). Nelson maintains that "putting the experience of transcendent crying into words is such a fragile affair" (2005:215) but admits that in her own experience of transcendental tears, she feels "cleansed and healed by the process" (2005:216) and experiences "a deeply felt sense of attachment and love, which brought me immense comfort" (2005:200).

Elkins (2001) however, points out that the viewers of today are less inclined to react emotionally in response to looking at a painting. He has found evidence that people cried in front of paintings from the late Middle Ages, early Renaissance, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but notes how "Few Centuries, it seems, are determinedly as tearless as ours" and although some people still do cry in front of paintings they are few and far between (2001:x). He believes this is largely due to the numbing effect of mass exposure to images and art history's alienating of emotive responses (Elkins 2001:77,87). "A picture can be taken in so quickly, and reproductions of it can be so accurate, that it can be impossible *not* to see it again and again over the years. After a while, the effect is numbing" (Elkins 2001:77). Speaking of repeated exposure of once loved and powerful paintings, Elkins notes that: "Not only have I forgotten my first encounters with them, which were sometimes intense, but I have almost forgotten that they mean *anything*" (2001:77).

Shaw notices that emotive responses are restrained today when he suggests that:

⁸⁸ In his essay *Against the Sublime*, Elkins' only suggestion at an alternative to the sublime is a proposition: "let's say what we admire in art and science, but let's say it directly, using words that are fresh and exact" (2009:26).

the concept of the sublime lends itself well to the idea of the transcendent. . . . Yet such instinctive feeling for the transcendental is rare these days. As a result of secularism, together with increasing global awareness and media sophistication, we seem less inclined to regard the breakdown of reason and expression as indicators of a higher or spiritual realm. Thus as the critic Thomas Weiskel has claimed, even as the sublime continues to bear on our imaginative life, we no longer share in the sacred or mystical aspects of the sublime, which went unquestioned by previous generations. (2006:3).

Steiner suggests that to truly be moved by an artwork the viewer has to lose control to a degree: "The experience of beauty involves an exchange of power, and as such, it is often disorientating, a mix of humility and exaltation, subjugation and liberation, awe and mystified pleasure" (Steiner 2001: xxi).

The suggested decline in emotive responses to paintings may have something to do with how paintings are experienced. Although I have been deeply moved, sometimes to tears, in viewing particular paintings⁸⁹ and performances from life, the majority of the art I experience is mediated through computers and books. I find that in general, these mediated experiences cause little emotional effect and that this may be the price of easy access to the imagery of art.⁹⁰ It seems ironic that a mode of painting that is able to reinvest a type of technological mediation (the multipliable photographic image) with uniqueness and the power to move viewers to tears, is transformed again by the very same technological mediation into a mass producible image that distorts its emotive potential. The painting importantly does not revert back to photography because the viewer is still aware of its existence as an original painting.

Photorealism can be seen as an attempt to counter the numbing effect of the mass media Elkins refers to. By meticulously translating a photograph into paint (even if it is viewed through various forms of mediation), images that have become so commonplace and mass producible in western society can be re-invested with strangeness and mystery and may cause the viewer to think and feel differently about what is pictured.

Photorealistic painting seems to want to counter the accusation against much contemporary (especially conceptual) art that it does not demonstrate technical skill (beyond the intellectual). The notion of a pursuit for 'perfection' as discussed earlier in this chapter and so evident in photorealist art, may be fed by an intention on the part of the artist to demonstrate some kind of laborious manual and technical skill. The evidence of this skill may be a part of what evokes a sense of awe or a feeling of the sublime in the viewer. Photography may differ in this regard in that its sublime aspects may lie in the photograph's special mechanical ability to record and document reality and to offer proof that something existed. A painting may look like a photograph and retain some of these photographic elements but it is the *material* properties, the

⁸⁹ One such painting seen in a Museum in Kassel is still hauntingly real in my mind. I remember looking at it in absolute disbelief. This portrait seemed uncanny. The fact that something so flat and 'dead' could be so syntactically real was awe-inspiring. Perhaps I did not cry but the strange feelings this painting evoked, in my mind equate to an experience of a sublime moment or of that potential for tears.

fact that it is a painting, that sets photorealistic paintings apart and that animates different responses. Each medium has its own nuances and strengths in the way they are able to offer different emotive responses.

Similarly, different paintings use different techniques to elicit the sublime experience. Whereas Mark Rothko's paintings may evoke emotive responses due to their simplicity, photorealistic paintings are often looked at in awe because of their incredible technical perfection, 'reality' and life-likeness'. A viewer may admire the time, skill and labour necessary in achieving such verisimilitude to photography. This may reach a level of absolute disbelief as the viewer wonders how such uncanny technical skill is even possible. Many viewers think my paintings are photographs at first, and when they discover the artworks are paintings, they express disbelief. They seem to want to look closer and be impressed by the labour involved in their creation.

From this section it can be recognised that paintings may deeply affect the viewing subject, an attempt can be made at explaining and coming to terms with this experience but ultimately paintings and the experiences they offer a viewer remain mysterious. Actual felt experience and writing about that experience differ in significant ways. The writing, while not able to fully convey or capture the experience seeks to acknowledge it and communicate this acknowledgement of the experience with others.

Bechtle makes us hyperaware of our surroundings through a theatricality that is, in his case, often so subtle it is hard to put one's finger on it. For all their attention to detail, his paintings, watercolors, and drawings transcend the descriptive to convey the ineffable, out of body feeling of returning home from a long trip or stepping outside into daylight after a matinee and squinting at the sudden disequilibrium of everything we thought we knew. The shadows have shifted. We know that things are not as they were when we left off, but we are not quite sure what has changed. As Anaïs Nin said, 'We don't see things as they are, we are things as we are.' Through Bechtle's transmutations and distillations of his world, our world, our sense of time and place becomes that of the paintings, which exist on the verge of unknown potential. (Bishop 2005:32).

Paintings that emotionally affect the viewer are necessarily resistant to easy readings. In discussions of aesthetic theory, Burke maintains that:

there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little. (1776:105).

Nevertheless, the "knowledge and acquaintance" this study has offered may deepen an understanding of a painting without making the paintings any less mysterious. This knowledge may amplify their mystery, their silence and their emotive effects. Although it may not be possible to adequately explain the emotive effects of a painting on the viewer, it seems that by using a combination of approaches; when a painting is described as both near and far, familiar and yet unfamiliar, piercing and sublime, the reader may get closer to acknowledging the emotive and wordless power of paintings. Each emotive response theory seems to deal with bringing

together contradictions and opposite states. As Alpers (1983) maintains of Dutch seventeenth century painting, the viewer is confronted with the surfaces of things rather than a narrative. A sense of utter resistance to meaning and narrative may be felt in the face of these surfaces described in paint. At the same time, the layers of simultaneous contradiction; of life and death, familiarity and unfamiliarity, bounded and unboundedness, found in the works of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself keeps the viewer engaged in what can be described as a kind of silent and endless dialogue. The paintings of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself may vacillate on a delicate edge between a myriad of contradictions and in so doing they remain perpetual mysteries, asking the viewer to forever try to figure them out. "Like particles and interjections in Language, art seems to say nothing, but leaves nothing unsaid" (Shibles 1995:236).

Theories about emotive responses to paintings, as offered by Elkins (2001) and Judith Mason (1998), seem to urge that the viewer should spend more time attending to looking. "Pictures aren't flashcards. It takes time to read them" (Mason 1998:18). Elkins says:

There is no reason looking should be easy, because pictures are not just decoration. They are peculiar objects that pull at us, tugging us a little out of the world. A picture will leave me unmoved if I don't take time with it, but if I stop, and let myself get a little lost, there's no telling what might happen. (2001:54).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Through this study, I have attempted to outline certain ways in which photorealism engages with reality. I have investigated the role that technological mediation (in the form of the *camera obscura* and contemporary photographic camera) plays in the paintings of four artists. The four artists examined in this study have used technological mediation in somewhat different ways, whether in terms of the peculiarities of the *camera obscura*, the specific way photography captures light and tone, the language of snapshot photography or the juxtaposition and collaging of photographs. At the outset, I imagined this technological language of the camera was used in a relatively uniform manner and the artists were chosen for their apparent similarities. However, through my analysis of specific paintings by Vermeer, Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself, it became clear to me that the technology used by each results in far more differences than previously thought.

Chapter Two investigated some of the ways in which reality has been negotiated as a theoretical construct and it gave an overview of some art historical negotiations of reality in painting in order to contextualise contemporary photorealism. I explored the relationship photorealism and photography may have to the physical world in a mechanical sense, as well as how the viewer makes sense of these varying levels of reality and artifice through philosophical interpretation. The relationship a photorealistic painting has to reality, it is suggested, is multifaceted: partly natural, mechanical and familiar; partly semantic and constructed through the languages of signs; and partly opaque, contradictory and beyond understanding. A singular theory for understanding photorealism's relationship to reality was seen to be inadequate and so a combined theoretical approach including mimesis and semiotics was suggested.

Chapter Three examined the way in which Vermeer negotiated reality in his paintings with the help of the *camera obscura*. I suggested that the introduction of camera vision, something photorealism is so dependent on, did not start with photography but with the *camera obscura*. In studying Vermeer's use of the *camera obscura* and its history, I suggested that the *camera obscura* played an important role in changing the way painters could depict reality and in shifting the dominant scopic regime from Cartesian perspective to a camera mode of vision. What also emerged from the literature on this subject is that photography was both a development of and a departure from the *camera obscura* model of vision.

What is evident in Vermeer's paintings is the quiet, staged stillness, the striking tonal values and the immaculate command of light. It is through his great skill in terms of both painting and the mastering of the *camera obscura* that he achieved such painted perfection. Ironically, in closely copying the camera distortions and abstractions, he created more convincing illusions of reality.

In three distinct sections, Chapter Four set out to understand the role of contemporary photographic mediation in the work of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself, and to understand how the multiple contradictory states at play in select paintings by all four artists can facilitate emotive responses in the viewer.

The first section looked at how the introduction of photography led to a further reassessment of visual reality in western painting and philosophy. The photograph's ability to easily and accessibly record, multiply and transform reality was shown to have major visual and ideological implications for photorealism's unique ability to create specific visions of the real. Photorealism could be seen as a reflection and reaction to photography but also as an active part of the renegotiation of visual reality, as it simultaneously assimilates and veils the photographic image. It was suggested that in bringing the languages and traditions of photography and painting together, photorealism creates a tension between reality and artifice and encourages an awareness of the levels of mediation between reality, photography and painting. Photorealism takes the disposable, everyday and common, 'memory' image of photography and reinvests it with the appearance of permanence and stillness that seems to demand contemplation and makes it both pleasurable and strange.

My intention in the second part of Chapter Four was to study the way in which reality is carefully and subtly negotiated in the works of Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself through the technological mediation of photography and through each artists' sensibilities, contexts and intensions. Although similarities are evident, the way in which camera vision is utilised in each artist's work allows for a very particular way of picturing reality, resulting in individual visions, moods and social commentary. The use of photography was also seen to create multiple contradictions and tensions in each photorealistic painting. Reality and artifice; veiling and revealing the use of the photograph; the look of a mechanically, disposable and instantly produced photograph and the subtle evidence and knowledge of the artist's hand in 'slowing down' the image were seen to be at constant play and contribute to the visual and psychological rewards of experiencing them.

In Bechtle's acknowledgement of the photographic references of his work, the instantaneous and disposable snapshot is eternally fixed and stilled in paint. It is their ordinary, everyday and banal appearance and the strange uncanny mood this evokes that strikes me. In Van Zyl's work it is the personal investment and content of his photographically derived subject matter that animates the sublime, the uncanny and 'tears'. Although these artists were initially chosen because my work has been influenced by them and I identified clear similarities, what I have learnt through this study is how different my work is to theirs.

It has been suggested that the act of painting can have deep significance as a meditative act, a search for perfection, a creation of a particular atmosphere, an embedding of a psychological intensity and as a way of "possessing the photograph" (Weinberg 2005:60) for the photorealist painter. Part of what makes Vermeer, Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my own work personally and perhaps socially relevant is their ability to emotively affect the viewer. The evidence of technical skill in a photorealist painting may be a part of what evokes a sense of wonder in the viewer. The final section of Chapter Four aimed to explore some of the emotive results of making and viewing these paintings. Through briefly exploring some theoretical approaches related to emotive responses, theories including 'the suspension of disbelief', 'disinterestedness', the '*punctum*', 'the uncanny', 'the sublime' and 'tears', it was evident that emotive responses are highly subjective and notoriously difficult to theorise but that each of these theories could be applied to Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my own paintings. It was suggested that in combination, these theories

nevertheless contribute to a better understanding of how and why viewers react emotively to these paintings, even if they cannot fully explain these emotive responses.

It has become evident that a common thread among the many emotive response theories seems to be a bringing together of opposite and contradictory states or dealing with the boundary between them. Throughout this study, numerous tensions and contradictions in photorealistic paintings have been made evident largely due to the way in which the technological mediation of the camera has been negotiated in each artist's paintings. It is these inherent contradictions, it seems, that generate emotive rewards, potentially sublime experiences and 'tears' for the viewer. It was suggested that the paintings looked at in this study are *necessarily* resistant to easy readings because they are such highly contradictory objects, but that this might be the very reason they have such emotive potential and thus continue to be meaningful art forms.

I initially thought the approach of this study would be more analytical of technology but it has evolved into a brief philosophical analysis of some of the ways selected artists have negotiated reality through their painting. Particular theories and theorists were selected to further mediate, interpret and understand this negotiation of reality between artist, painting and viewer. Although there were many other theorists who provided valid arguments and interpretive approaches, I chose to include only those who seemed most relevant to the negotiation of the real in painting. This has proven to be an enlightening shift in focus. A further reason for this shift was that besides Bechtle, there were not many sources that dealt with the technological and technical methodology of each artist. In addition, it seems that many artists are quite reluctant to discuss their use of technology, perhaps for fear of their artistic integrity being put into question: a fear that viewers and critics may think the artist lacks the technical skill to paint 'from life'. I hope that this study has challenged the view that artists who work from photographs lack artistic integrity, and that the reader is left with an enriched view of photorealism as a relevant contemporary art form, and an awareness of the hidden complexities and nuances beneath the seamless veneers of paint.

Central to these paintings is a representational engagement with the great tension between ideas imposed on photographs; that they are instantaneous, mass producible, disposable, easy and objective, and certain ideas about painting; as a time-consuming, specialised, permanent, individual, expensive, subjective and slow undertaking. This careful technologically mediated negotiation and interpretation of reality thus creates visual and emotive paradoxes that can be rewarding to the viewer. Through the critical engagement with current photographic technology, Bechtle, Van Zyl and I are able to subjectively interpret rather than just copy visual reality. Each artist may pretend to copy reality but the way it has been mediated results in unique visions, very different visual tones and distinct signatures in their paintings. Although there are commonalities, it is the differences between the works of Vermeer, Bechtle, Van Zyl and myself that make each artist's vision unique.

This study has served as a recognition of photography's unique ability to interpret reality, but also as a reaffirmation of painting "in the face of photography" (Osborne 1992:107), and the multitude of images in circulation today. Furthermore, the artworks I have analysed seem to underscore

the importance of photography as a catalyst for new ways of picturing reality. In Weinberg's view, photography may give birth to painting:

Bechtle's work provokes us to revisit the idea, first suggested by the nineteenth-century history painter Paul Delaroche, that photography might herald the end for painting. Now, however, we realize that photography threatens painting not by supplanting or imitating its functions, but rather by becoming its origin - photography now gives birth to painting rather than the other way around. (2005:59).

However, Weinberg speculates that Bechtle "employed the photograph not to put an end to painting but to discover what was left for the medium" (2005:59), and so a symbiotic relationship between photography and painting persists. Through an exploration of Vermeer, Bechtle, Van Zyl's and my own work, I am certain of photorealistic painting's unique ability to interpret and slow down the fleeting photographic image and the ephemeral experiences of the visual world into objects of beauty, delicate tensions and of deep emotive value.

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Available: http://whitney.org/www/2008biennial/www/images/artist_images/artist_bechtle.jpg [2010, May 28].

Fig 2. Adriaan van Zyl, *Arrival*. 2004. Oil on board, 54 x 40 cm. Collection of Jacques Badenhorst. (Hunt & Botha 2007: 47).

Fig 3. Cornelius Gijbrechts, *Trompe l'oeil*. c. 1630 - after 1675. Oil on canvas, 101.9 x 83.4 cm. Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent.

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Available: http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue_xl/xl_allegory_of_faith.html [2010, July 30].

Fig 7. Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Drinking with Two Men, and a Serving Woman*. c.1685. Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 64.6 cm. National Gallery, London.

Available: <http://www.artilim.com/artist/hooch-pieter-de/a-woman-drinking-with-two-men.aspx> [2010, July 30].

Fig 8. Illustration showing an impossible row of tiles in Pieter de Hooch's *A Woman Drinking with Two Men, and a Serving Woman* (compare fig 7). (Crary 2001:82).

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Fig 15. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *The Guitar Player*. c. 1670-72. Oil on canvas, 53 x 46.3 cm. English Heritage as Trustees of the Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood.

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Fig 16. Johannes Vermeer, *The Girl with the Red Hat*. c. 1665-67. Oil on panel, 22.8 x 18 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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Available: http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue_xl/xl_art_of_painting.html [2010, July 30].

Fig 18. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. c. 1665. Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 40 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague. (left). X-ray photograph of the same detail (right).

Fig 19. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *The Girl with the Red Hat*. c. 1665-67. Oil on panel, 22.8 x 18 cm. (left). National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Available: <http://www.cab.u-szeged.hu/wm/paint/auth/vermeer/i/girl-red-hat.jpg> [2010, July 31].

Photograph by Henry Beville illustrating disks of confusion (right). (Seymour 1964:335).

Fig 20. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*. c. 1662-1665. Oil on canvas, 42.5 x 38 cm. The National Gallery, Washington D. C.

Available: http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/woman_holding_a_balance.html [2010, July 27].

Fig 21. Johannes Torrentius, *Emblematic still life with flagon, glass, jug and bridle*. 1614. Oil on canvas, 52 x 50.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Available: <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/assetimage.jsp?id=SK-A-2813> [2010, July 30].

Fig 22. Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*. 1878. Photograph.

Available: http://www.masters-of-photography.com/M/muybridge/muybridge_galloping_horse_full.html [2010, August 31].

Fig 23. Gina Heyer, *Passages*. 2007-2009. Oil on board, 91 x 30.5 cm. Private collection.

Fig 24. Robert Bechtle, *20th and Texas, Early Evening*. 2004. Oil on linen, 83.2 x 97.8 cm.

Available: <http://www.bigcrow.com/anna/journal/robert-bechtle.html> [2010, Sept 3].

Fig 25. Gina Heyer, *Room 1*. 2007-2009. Oil on board, 58.2 x 30.2. Sanlam Collection, Bellville.

Fig 26. Gina Heyer, *Fragment*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 25.8 x 30.4 cm. Private collection.

Fig 27. Adriaan Van Zyl, *Waiting Room*. 2004. Oil on canvas, 31 x 42 cm. Private collection. (Hundt & Botha 2007:48).

Fig 28. Gina Heyer, *Hospital 1*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 42.2 x 44.2 cm. Private collection.

Fig 29. Gina Heyer, *Hospital 2*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 42.2 x 44.2 cm. Private collection.

Fig 30. Gina Heyer, *Currents 3*. 2009-2010. Oil on board, 58.5 x 44.2 cm. Sasol Art Museum collection, Stellenbosch.

Fig 31. Robert Bechtle, *20th and Mississippi – Night*. 2005. Oil on Linin, 94.6 x 170.8 x 4.8 cm. Available: <http://www.gladstonegallery.com/bechtle.asp?id=806> [2010, Sept 3].

Fig 32. Gina Heyer, *Untitled*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 121.7 x 35.8 cm. Private collection.

Fig 33. Four collaged photographs used as references for *Untitled*.

Fig 34. Gina Heyer, *Room 2*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 59 x 30.7 cm. Private collection.

Fig 35. Adriaan van Zyl, *Hospital Diptych 3*. 2004. Oil on canvas, 40 x 31 cm. Private collection. (Hundt & Botha 2007:48).

Fig 36. Adriaan van Zyl, *Hospital Diptych 1 - The Waiting Room*. 2004. Oil on canvas, 54 x 40 cm. Private collection. (Hundt & Botha 2007:22-23).

Fig 37. Gina Heyer, *Two Chairs*. 2007-2009. Oil on board, 38.5 x 31 cm. Private collection.

Fig 38. Adriaan van Zyl, *Operating Theatre 1*. 2004. Oil on board, 31 x 42 cm. Private collection. (Hundt & Botha 2007:55).

Fig 39. Robert Bechtle, *Texas Street Intersection*. 2000. Oil on canvas, 91.4 cm x 167.6 cm. Collection Malcolm Holzman, New York. (Bishop et.al. 2005:Colourplate 87).

Fig 40. Robert Bechtle, *Alameda Gran Torino*. 1974. Oil on canvas, 121.92 cm x 175.26 cm. Collection SFMOMA, San Francisco. Available: <http://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/3509> [2010, Sept 3].

Fig 41. Robert Bechtle, *Sunset Garage*. 1994. Oil on canvas, 71.1 x 96.5 cm. Collection of Gary and Deborah Lucidon. (Bishop et.al. 2005:Colourplate 71).

Fig 42. Gina Heyer, Detail of *Hospital 2*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 42.2 x 44.2 cm. Private collection.

Fig.43. Robert Bechtle, Detail of *Alameda Gran Torino*. 1974. Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 175.3 cm. Collection SFMOMA, San Francisco. (Bishop et.al. 2005:Colourplate 33).

Fig 44. Robert Bechtle, Detail of *Texas Street Intersection*. 2000. Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 167.6 cm. Collection Malcolm Holzman, New York. (Kalina 2005:137).

Fig 45. Robert Bechtle, Detail of *Sunset Garage*. 1994. Oil on canvas, 71.1 x 96.5 cm. Collection of Gary and Deborah Lucidon. (Bishop et.al. 2005:Colourplate 71).

Fig 46. Robert Bechtle, *Watsonville Chairs*. 1976. Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 175.3 cm. Collection of Gary and Deborah Lucidon.

Available:

http://www.artnet.com/artists/lotdetailpage.aspx?lot_id=4F908FE6A015A470E3866165CF0728BC [2010 Sept, 16]

Fig 47. Robert Bechtle, *Santa Barbara Chairs*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 121.3 x 174 cm. Estate of Richard Brown Baker, New Haven. (Bishop et.al. 2005:Colourplate 49).

Addendum 1: Illustrations



Fig 1. Robert Bechtle, *Six Houses on Mound Street*. 2006. Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 167.6 cm.



Fig 2. Adriaan van Zyl, *Arrival*. 2004. Oil on board, 54 x 40 cm.



Fig 3. Cornelius Gijbrechts, *Trompe l'oeil*. c. 1630 - after 1675. Oil on canvas, 101.9 x 83.4 cm.

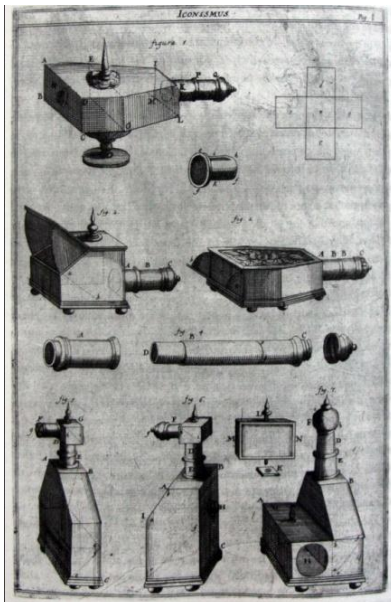


Fig 4. Johann Zahn, Designs of a portable *camera obscura*. 1685-1686.

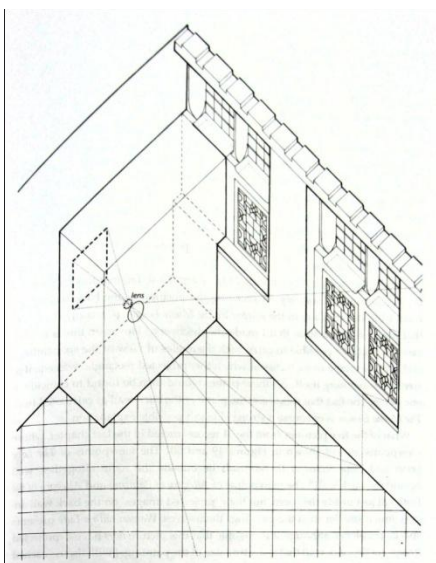


Fig 5. Possible arrangement for Vermeer's *camera obscura*.



Fig 6. Johannes Vermeer, *Allegory of Faith*. c. 1671- 1674. Oil on canvas, 114.3 x 88.9 cm.



Fig 7. Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Drinking with Two Men, and a Serving Woman*. c.1685. Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 64.6 cm.

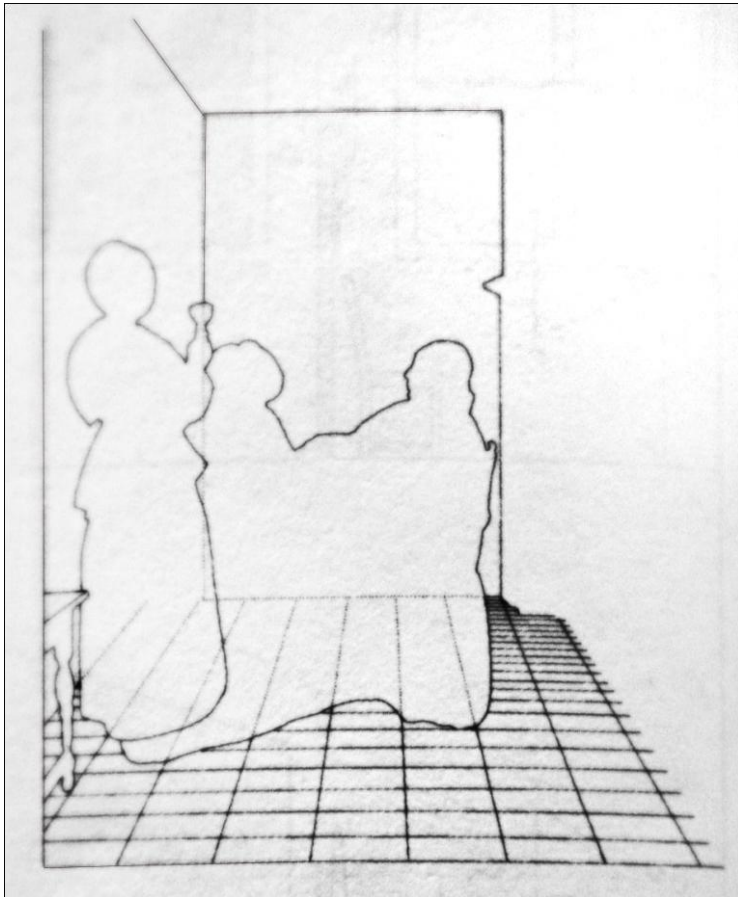


Fig 8. Illustration showing an impossible row of tiles in Pieter de Hooch's *A Woman Drinking with Two Men, and a Serving Woman* (compare fig 7).



Fig 9. Pieter de Hooch, *Soldier Paying a Hostess*. 1658. Oil on canvas, 71 x 63.5 cm.

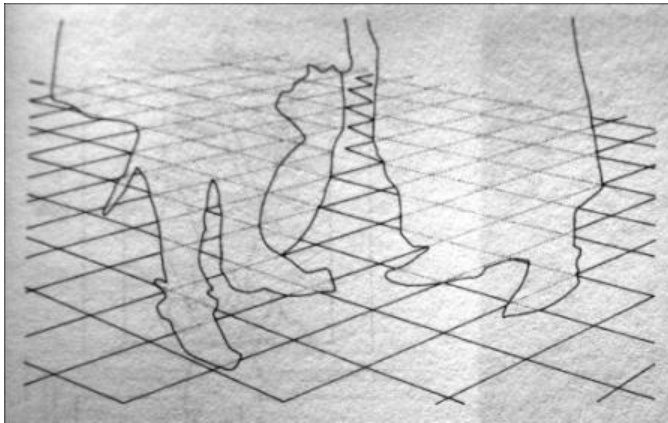


Fig 10. Outline of the impossible tile pattern between figures' legs in Pieter de Hooch's *A Soldier Paying a Hostess* (compare fig 10).

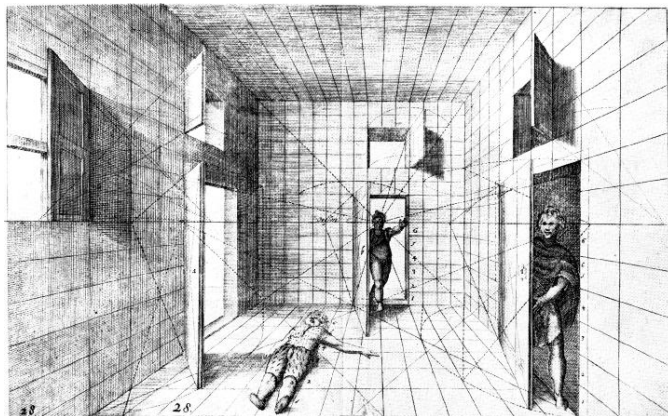


Fig 11. Jan Vredeman de Vries, *Perspective*. 1604-5.



Fig 12. Johannes Vermeer, *The Lace Maker*. c. 1669-70. Oil on canvas, 24.5 x 21 cm.



Fig 13. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *The Lace Maker*. c. 1669-70. Oil on canvas, 24.5 x 21 cm.



Fig 14. Johannes Vermeer, *The Guitar Player*. c. 1670-72. Oil on canvas, 53 x 46.3 cm.



Fig15. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *The Guitar Player*. c. 1670-72. Oil on canvas, 53 x 46.3 cm.

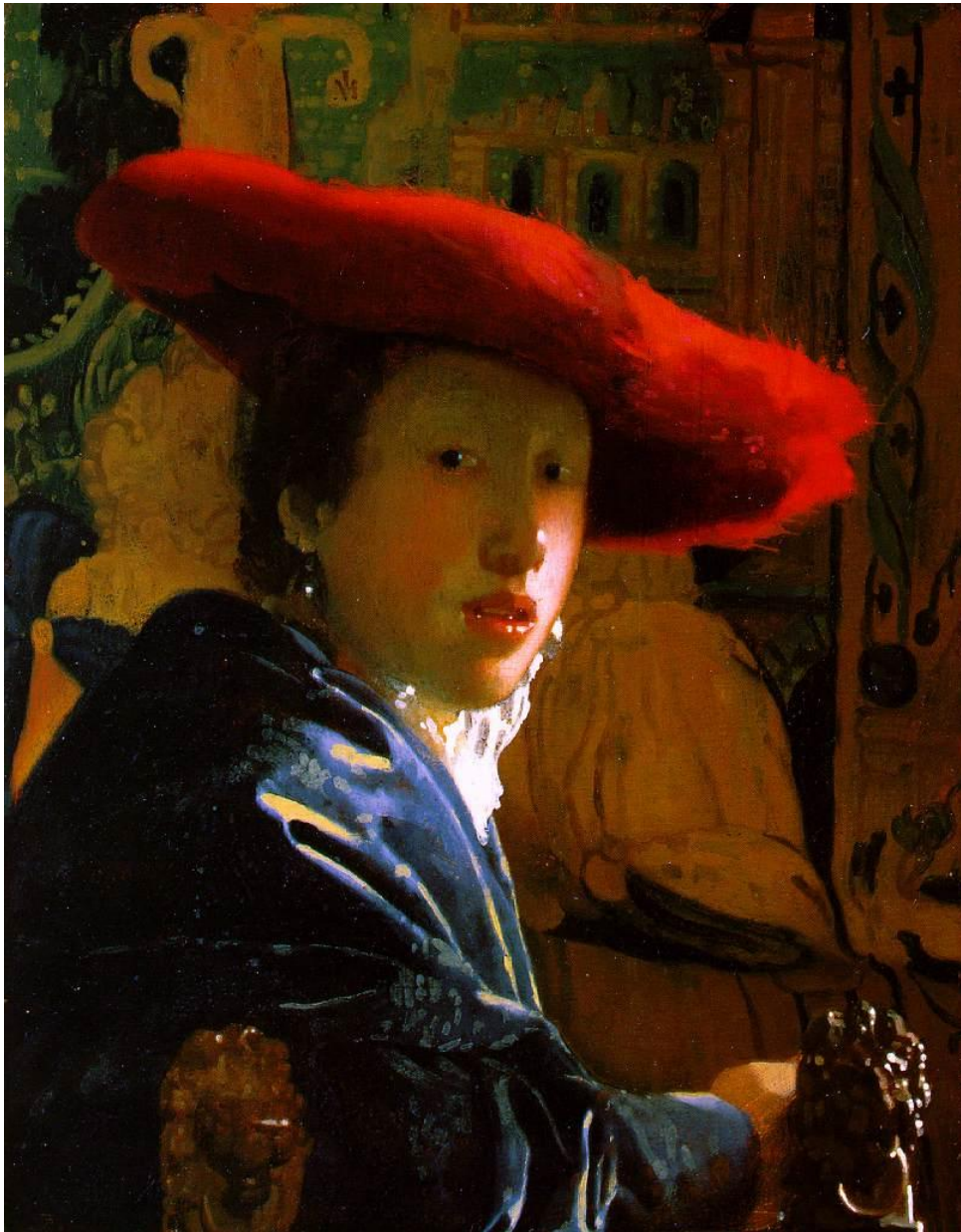


Fig 16. Johannes Vermeer, *The Girl with the Red Hat*. c. 1665-67. Oil on panel, 22.8 x 18 cm.



Fig 17. Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*. c. 1662-68
Oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm.

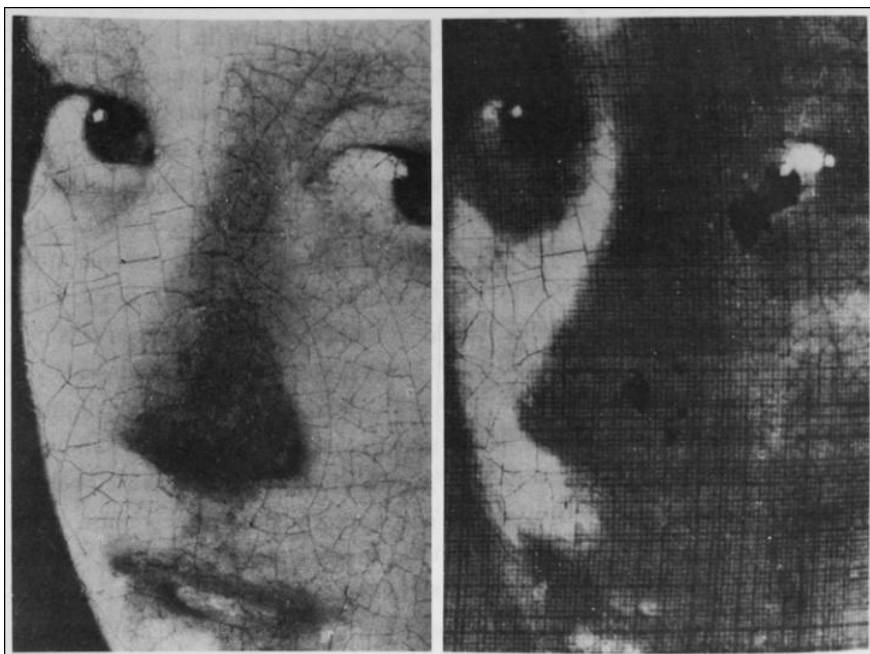


Fig 18. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. c. 1665. Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 40 cm. (left). X-ray photograph of the same detail (right).

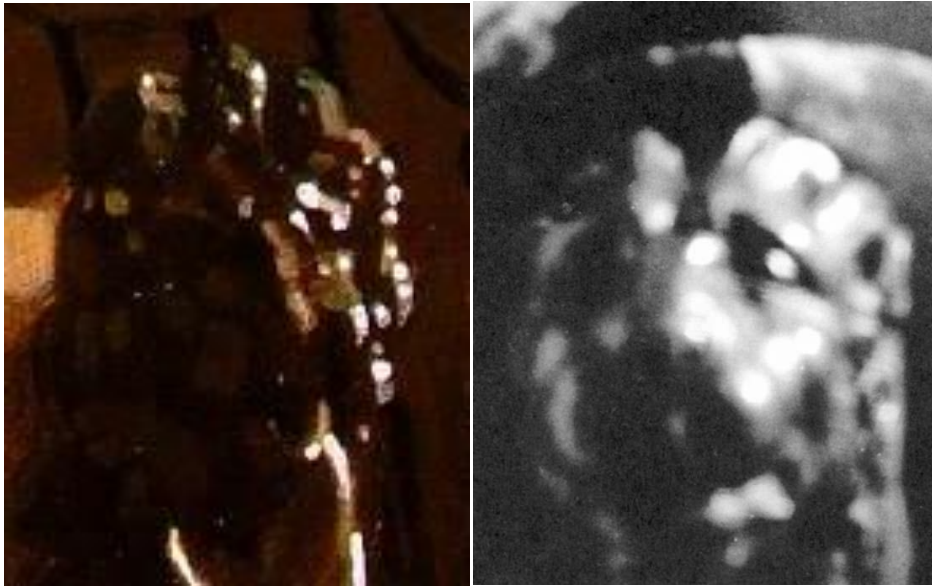


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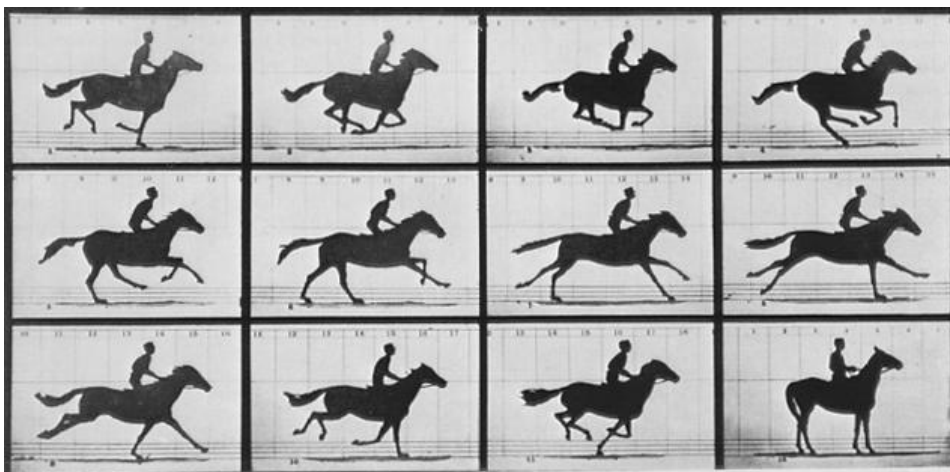


Fig 22. Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*. 1878. Photograph.



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Fig 24. Robert Bechtle, *20th and Texas, Early Evening*. 2004. Oil on linen, 83.2 x 97.8 cm.

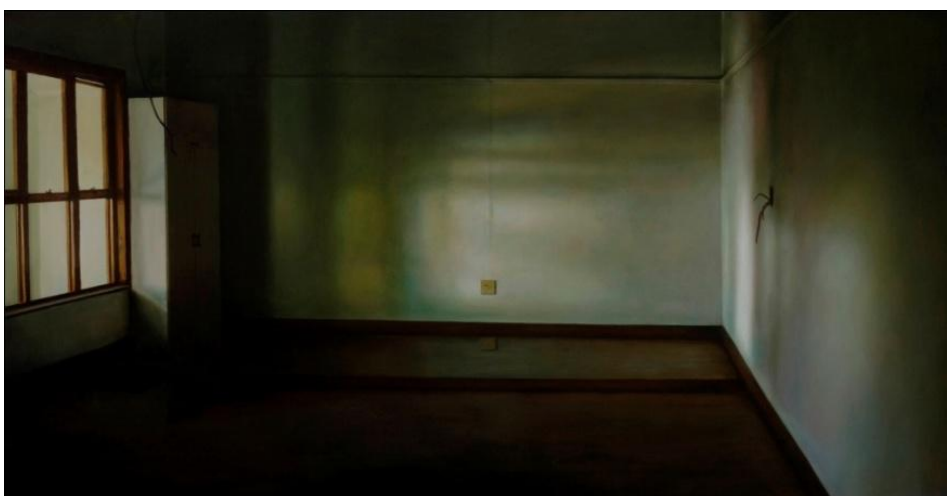


Fig 25. Gina Heyer, *Room 1*. 2007-2009. Oil on board, 58.2 x 30.2.

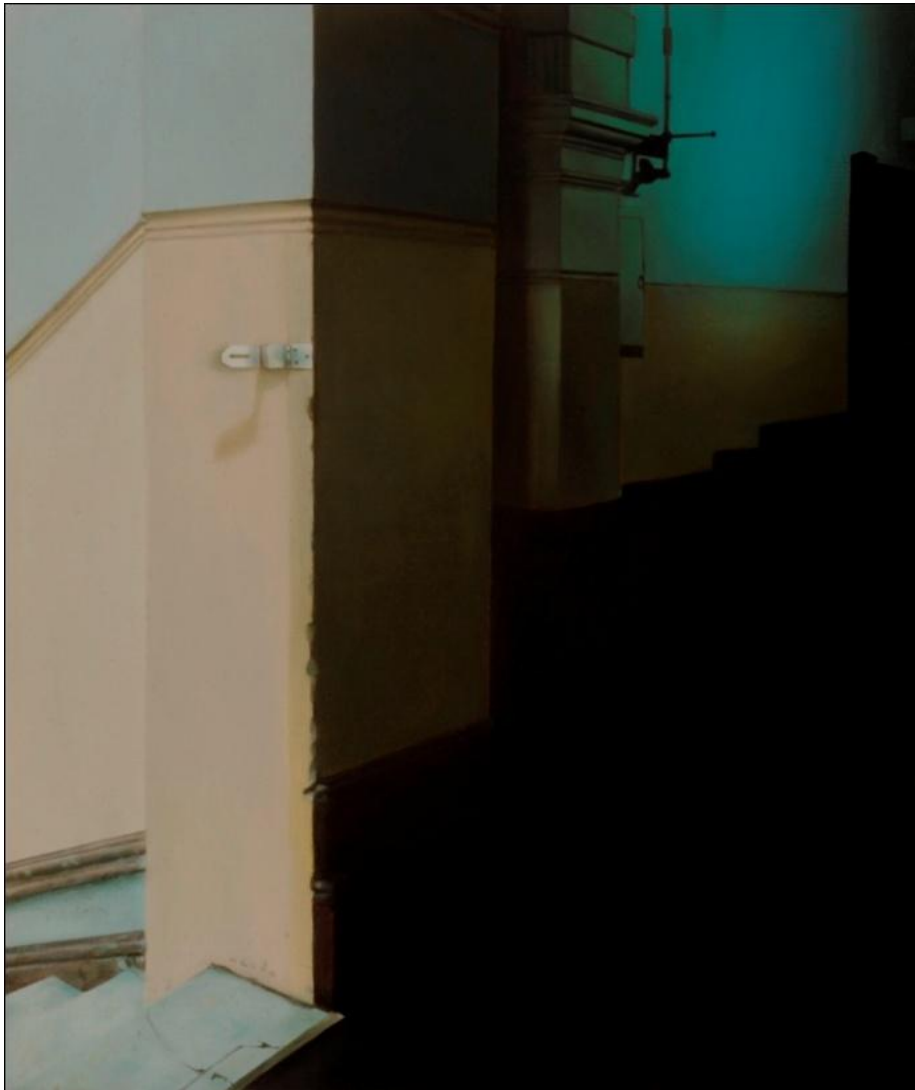


Fig 26. Gina Heyer, *Fragment*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 25.8 x 30.4 cm.



Fig 27. Adriaan Van Zyl, *Waiting Room*. 2004. Oil on canvas, 31 x 42 cm.

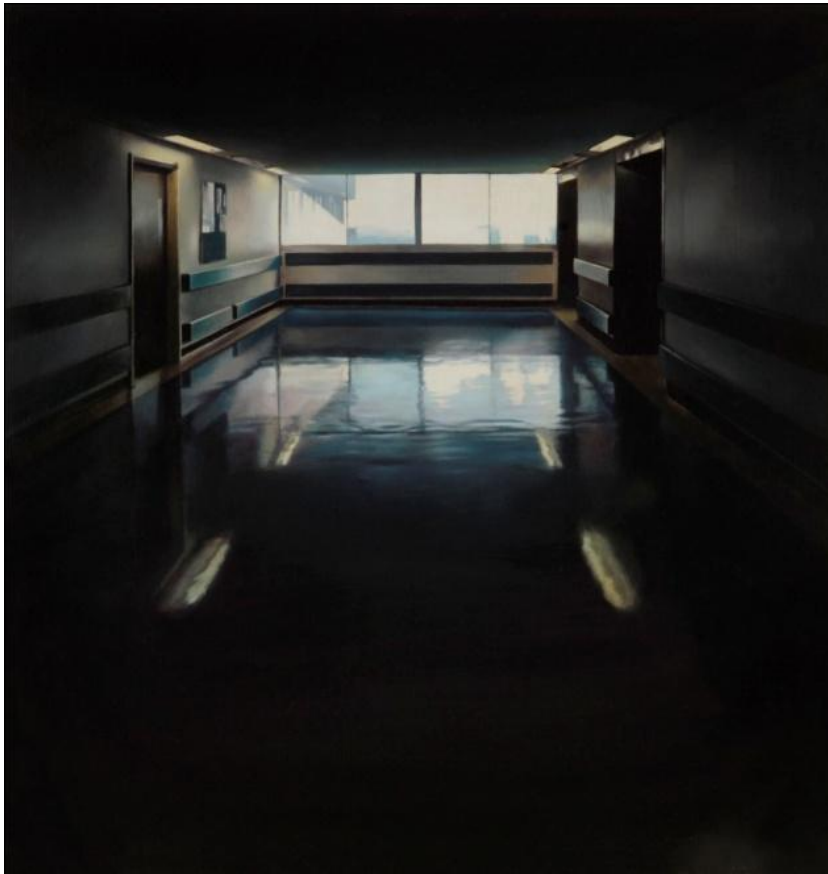


Fig 28. Gina Heyer, *Hospital* 1. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 42.2 x 44.2 cm.



Fig 29. Gina Heyer, *Hospital* 2. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 42.2 x 44.2 cm.

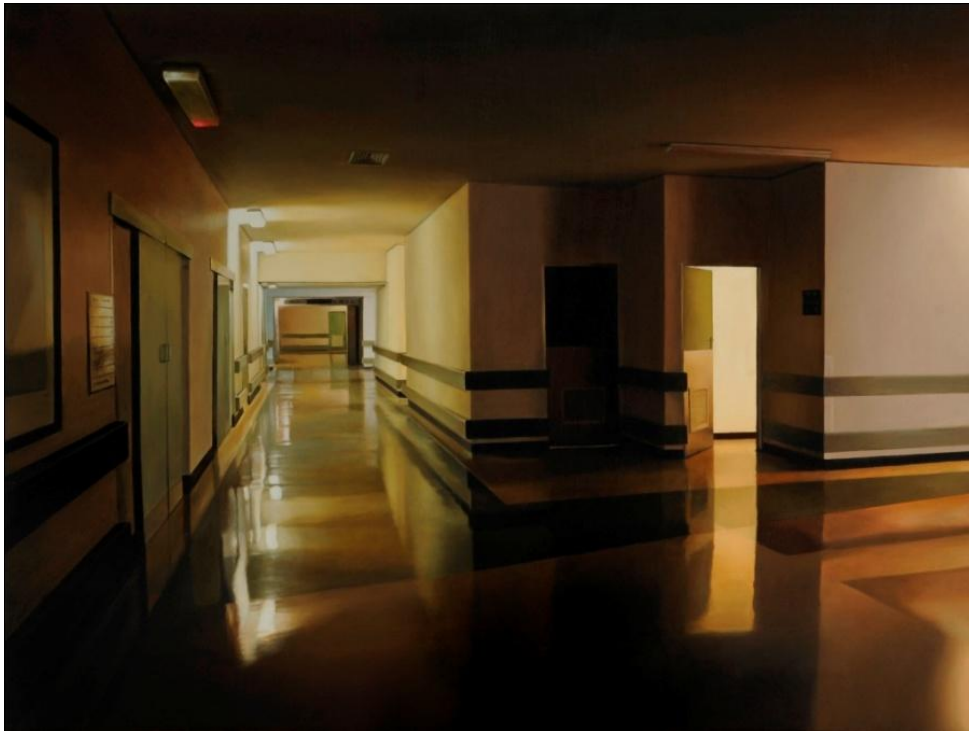


Fig 30. Gina Heyer, *Currents* 3. 2009-2010. Oil on board, 58.5 x 44.2 cm.



Fig 31. Robert Bechtle, *20th and Mississippi – Night*. 2005. Oil on Linin, 94.6 x 170.8 x 4.8 cm.



Fig 32. Gina Heyer, *Untitled*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 121.7 x 35.8 cm.



Fig 33. Four collaged photographs used as references for *Untitled*.



Fig 34. Gina Heyer, *Room 2*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 59 x 30.7 cm.

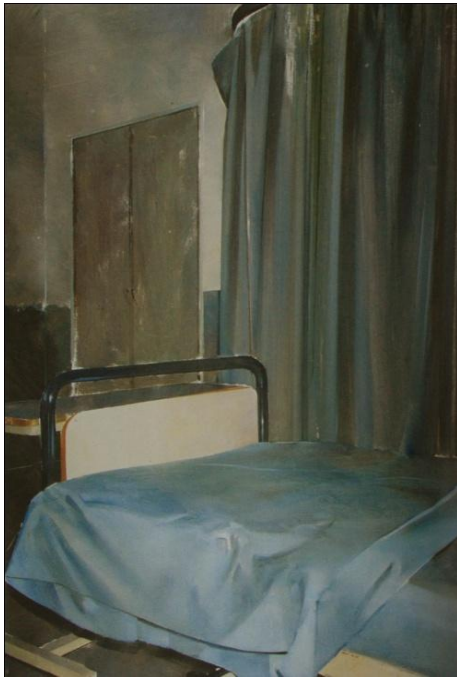


Fig 35. Adriaan van Zyl, *Hospital Diptych 3*. 2004. Oil on canvas, 40 x 31 cm.



Fig 36. Adriaan van Zyl, *Hospital Diptych 1 - The Waiting Room*. 2004. Oil on canvas. 54 cm x 40 cm.



Fig 37. Gina Heyer, *Two Chairs*. 2007-2009. Oil on board, 38.5 x 31 cm.



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Fig 42. Gina Heyer, Detail of *Hospital 2*. 2008-2009. Oil on board, 42.2 x 44.2 cm.



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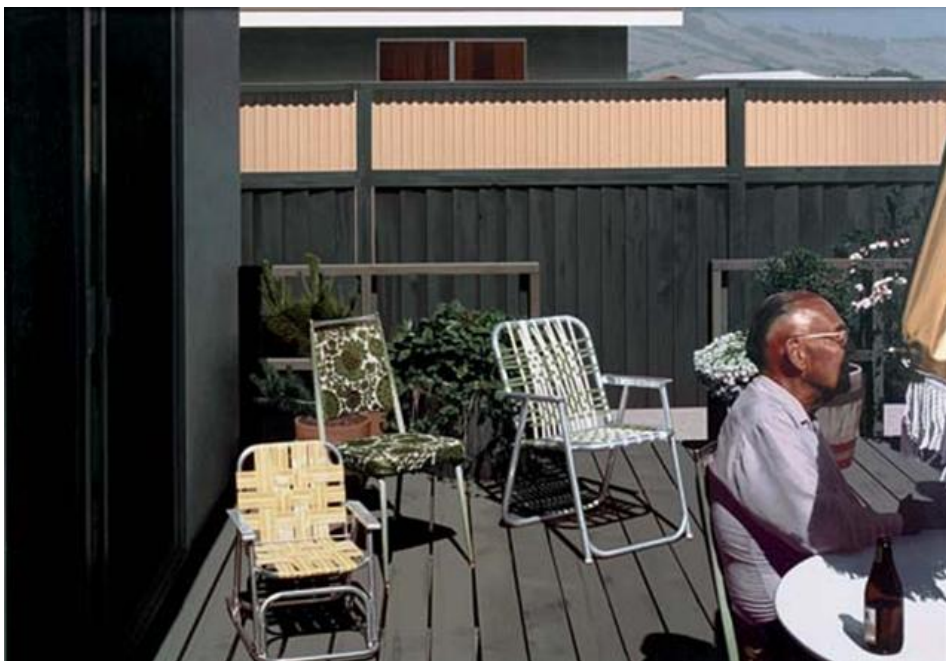


Fig 46. Robert Bechtle, *Watsonville Chairs*. 1976. Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 175.3 cm.



Fig 47. Robert Bechtle, *Santa Barbara Chairs*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 121.3 cm x 174 cm.



GINA HEYER | THRESHOLD

GINA HEYER – THRESHOLD was produced by iArt Gallery to accompany an exhibition of the same name.

Text: Vivian van der Merwe

Photography: Richard van Ryneveld

Design and layout: Jacqueline Nurse



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GINA HEYER | THRESHOLD
3 - 18 FEBRUARY 2010

"Painting is easy when you don't know how and very difficult when you do." ¹



Doorways (2007 – 2009); oil on board, 262 x 304mm

PREVIOUS PAGE

Conversations (2007 – 2009); oil on board, 410 x 390mm

In a culture overloaded with printed and digital imagery, with artistic bling, with art that is desperately trying to be clever, and art that is often confused (and therefore confusing), it is profoundly difficult for a painter to proceed with a true sense of artistic purpose.

A painting is not merely a picture. It starts out as a piece of raw empty canvas, board or paper. As a painter you start with nothing. Every small incremental step away from this nothingness requires painstaking thought and action. Nothing can be taken as a given. Every grain of pigment is applied with artistic intent. Every square centimetre of pictorial space succeeds or fails as a result of the sum of its relationships to every other square centimetre that makes up a painting. If successful, the infinitely complex layers of process, pigment, varying degrees of opacity and transparency combine to create a space that is at once three-dimensional and two-dimensional. It is within the layered archaeology of these diaphanous yet material strata and sub-strata of paint that artistic intent and intelligence are manifested. Painting today is no easier than it has been for the past 60 000 years or more. In the contemporary artworld painting is arguably more challenging than ever before.

Like Nietzsche's tightrope walker in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Gina Heyer's work balances on an impossible-to-define edge. Her

paintings shift between representing universally recognisable places and the uncanny deconstruction thereof. The use of elaborate perspective theories, photography and digital technology are an integral part of her process. Like Degas, Vermeer and many of her predecessors, these visual technologies become creative catalysts deeply embedded in the constantly evolving art of painting. Heyer's rigorous use of classical and logical perspective is deliberately offset by the surreal subversion of such logic. We see little human presence in these uninhabited chambers and corridors, and yet these places resonate with intense pathos and humility. Photographic fidelity is constantly disrupted by irrational space, light and colour, rendered so convincingly that we are unable to distinguish between the two worlds. The familiarity of these spaces render them almost archetypal as if we've all known such places, and yet the deconstruction of architectural and constructional logic, sometimes subtly and sometimes obviously, makes these places unreasonable and uninhabitable – the kind of spaces we can only imagine or experience in dreams. And yet the attention to detail, texture, reflection, colour, light, shadow and spatial aesthetics leaves us completely convinced as to the intense reality of these spaces.

As a young artist, working in a challenging and controversial artworld, Gina Heyer has managed to transform seemingly ordinary subject matter. Working within the strict limitation of the traditional medium of oil painting, employing conservative pictorial conventions, and avoiding any conceptual mannerisms, she has created a vision that is extraordinary, quietly powerful and artistically significant.

Vivian van der Merwe
Stellenbosch, December 2009

1. Edgar Degas (Quoted on a T-shirt sold by the Museum of Modern Art, New York)





Paintings show us a single moment, even though they remain fixed for centuries. The ephemeral instant and unending duration are forced very close together, and that is one of painting's special strengths – one of the properties that sets it apart from other forms of art. The instant, the very definition of change, is pressed flat like a dried leaf in a collector's book and made to remain in place indefinitely.

James Elkins, 2001



Fragment (2008 – 2009); oil on board, 258 x 304mm
Corner (2009); oil on board, 267 x 305mm



PREVIOUS PAGE
Passages (2007 – 2009); oil on board, 910 X 305mm



Room 1 (2008 – 2009); oil on board, 582 x 302mm



Room 2 (2008 – 2009); oil on board, 590 x 307mm

FOLLOWING PAGES

Chair Profile (2007 – 2009); oil on board, 400 X 310mm

Two Chairs (2007 – 2009); oil on board, 385 x 310mm







Hospital 1 & 2 (2008 – 2009); oil on board, 422 x 442mm



Hospital 3 & 4 (2009); oil on board, 422 x 442mm







Currents 1 & 2 (2009 – 2010); oil on board, 380 x 440mm

PREVIOUS PAGE

Untitled (2008 – 2009); oil on board, 1217 x 358mm



Gina Heyer was born on 15 August 1983 in Empangeni, South Africa. Currently living, working and studying in Stellenbosch, South Africa, Heyer is currently completing her Masters degree in Fine Art at Stellenbosch University.

Threshold is Heyer's first solo exhibition and comprises work completed for her Masters degree.

The artist would like to thank iArt Gallery, Vivian van der Merwe, Richard van Ryneveld, Ben Harper and family and friends for their continued support.

A photograph of a modern, dark interior space. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, yellowish light source visible in the background, creating a strong contrast with the dark foreground. The architecture features clean lines and a mix of materials, including what appears to be wood or a similar textured material on the walls and ceiling. A hallway leads into the distance, and a staircase with a dark railing is visible on the right side. The overall mood is mysterious and sophisticated.

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gallery